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The
Skeleton in the Cupboard.

The
Skeleton in the Cupboard.



By LADY SCOTT,

Authoress of 'The Henpecked Husband,' 'The Only Child,' &c.



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Skeleton in the

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unexpected manner, a middle-aged baronet to The Laurels—Sir Felix Bohun of Bohun Court—and he, who had been accidentally drawn thither on a matter of business in which it was within Mr. Blackstone's vocation to assist him, at last found himself impelled by a question, not of law, but of love; and ended by laying his heart and all his wide worldly possessions at the feet of that fair creature whom he invited to become the third Lady Bohun.

Dazzled and delighted, for Euphemia was ambitious, the young girl did not keep the trembling captive long in suspense. It is true that Sir Felix had seen more than five-and-forty summers, and that in marrying him she would have to run the chance of comparison with two predecessors, both ladies of high degree; but she was not one to care for either of these little drawbacks.

"Had he been a widower with half-a-dozen grown-up daughters, mamma," said she, as she watched the sealing of the letter of acceptance, "we might have some just grounds for hesitation, and, I dare say, I should have said no, immediately; but, as it is, he is a bridegroom without encumbrances, and I like him all the better for his age. A younger man might not have given me so much my own way, and that I must have, as you well know, darling mother, even if I married the Marquis of Carabas."

Mrs. Blackstone had no arguments to urge against this; she was only so afraid that the disparity would make him an uncongenial companion to one so full of life, and spirits, and energy as Phemy; and at this the light-hearted girl laughed heartily. (She was incomparably more worldly than that trembling, anxious mother.)

"Don't fear, mamma," said she, "never mind his age. It is a brilliant match, and even had he been twenty years older, it is one which will be envied, right and left, from one end of our circle to the other!"

Truly spoken, fair Euphemia! you knew well enough, when you accepted Sir Felix Bohun, that the world would say you were marrying an elderly widower; but as long as the Bohun diamonds, and Bohun Court could be held up against the malicious assertion, you might laugh the world and its remarks to scorn.

Mr. Blackstone looked grave when called upon to give his sanction to what he considered the unequal match.

"I do not like the idea of Phemy's marrying so completely out of her sphere," said he, as he talked the subject over with his wife; but feminine eyes seldom see an eligible alliance in this light, and though Mrs. Blackstone had her own private fears and misgivings, and had even repeated the hint to Phemy that the disparity between them was the point to which she could not reconcile herself, she would not have a word said about the inequality. Phemy, in the eyes of her doating mother, was a fitting bride for any lord in the land, and as for taking her out of her sphere.....

"When a young girl marries, my dear," was her reply, as she bridled up with proper maternal pride and dignity, "one would surely rather see her rise higher in the world than sink to a lower place——"

"I did not wish that," exclaimed Mr. Blackstone, hastily, "I meant more on her own level."

"Oh, no," said his wife, in a tone of decision; "Phemy is worth more than that."

So Mr. Blackstone was silenced and corrected, and never ventured to interpose his objections again, and the wedding preparations went on.

It still wanted three weeks to the happy day—that day termed, by general consent, "the happy day!"—when all the parties concerned have arrived at the very last pitch of confusion, excitement, discomfort, and exhaustion; when your house is turned out of windows for the guests, as completely as is your purse for the *trousseau*, and everybody, cold and smart, shivers smilingly about the church and whispers to everybody else, "What an uncomfortable thing a wedding is!"

But almost all the preparations were concluded, even to the new gravelling of the approach to the house. All that money could do had been done, and Euphemia Blackstone was to be attended to church by as gay a bevy of bridesmaids as ever crowded round a more fashionable altar.

There remained but one vacuum to be filled up—the future Lady Bohun must have a maid of her own—as yet, she had shared her mother's—but now there must be "my lady's maid," and every train brought down some fresh young person for the situation.

Hitherto none had suited, and Mrs. Blackstone was be-

coming perfectly rabid. Every time the footman announced that there was another "young person," her gestures of impatience and despair increased with such violence, that, at last, the man seemed frightened to open the door. But Mrs. Blackstone was particular, and it was not every one who could please her. Some of these applicants were too smart, some too dowdy, some too stout, some too short. It must be a very nice-looking person to wait on Lady Bohun-to-be, not merely for the sake of personal satisfaction, but because Mrs. Blackstone wished her daughter to make her first appearance amongst her stately old servants at Bohun Court, of whom Sir Felix was never tired of talking, attended by some one calculated to uphold both her own dignity and that of her young mistress.

"Nothing like making a good show," was her constant maxim; "if you do not think well of yourself, nobody else will think well of you; I can trust to your supporting your dignity upstairs, my Phemy, but it must be supported downstairs too; so a meek, mild, milk-and-water maid will never do for Lady Bohun——"

"Say, rather, for the late Miss Blackstone," laughed the gay bride; "for the truth is, mamma, you are a little bit afraid people may think me not quite worthy to step into the shoes of the two former high-born dames of Bohun Court—but never fear! I shall not want that kind of support, I know pretty well how to stand up for myself—at the same time I wish we *could* find a nice person, if only that I might get accustomed to her before I leave home."

Not many minutes after this wish had been breathed, the footman's head was partly seen at the half-opened door; he had long ceased to open it boldly and show himself.

"If you please, ma'am, a young person for the lady's maid's place;" and for the hundred and fiftieth time she was desired to walk in.

Tall and slender, very calm of countenance, and staid in demeanour, a person of an indefinite age stood immediately before the mother and daughter, and at one glance the quick eye of Mrs. Blackstone had taken a general and satisfactory survey of her.

"This is the best we have seen," flashed through her mind, and then the usual inquiries began.

"You are accustomed to all the duties of a lady's-maid?"

"Perfectly, ma'am."

"And your last situation?"

"Lady Mary Topham; I lived with her ladyship six years——"

"And your reason for leaving?"

"Her ladyship died, ma'am; but these testimonials which I have received from the whole family, as well as the legacy that Lady Mary left me, will speak sufficiently, I hope, as to the confidential position I occupied."

Mrs. Blackstone gave a little cough.

"Ah! yes; but my daughter requires merely a lady's-maid. You understand?"

"Perfectly, ma'am. It was Lady Mary's pleasure to place confidence in me. I never sought it."

"Hem—yes—you seem young, rather——"

"I am forty, ma'am."

"Forty? good gracious! you look about five-and-twenty. Are you sure? but of course! goodness me—forty! Euphemia, my dear."

The young lady was pretending to write a letter, and only just glanced once upwards. "I do not think age signifies, mamma," she said.

"Well, then," pursued Mrs. Blackstone, on whom the manners, appearance, and language of the person before her were gradually making their due impression, "about hair-dressing, and dress-making, and all that?"

"Hair-dressing, dress-making, and millinery of every description," was the reply; "but Lady Mary never had her dresses made at home."

"Nor should I, of course," interposed the bride elect, hastily.

"But, my dear, it is necessary that your maid should possess these acquirements, even if you should not require to call them into use," said Mrs. Blackstone, with a sort of calm severity, and then she went on. "To whom can I apply for your character, supposing we engage you?"

"To the Countess of Merivale, ma'am, Lady Mary's mamma, with whom I lived eleven years."

"What! before you went to Lady Mary?"

"I was the Countess's own maid, ma'am; but when Lady Mary married Mr. Topham, her mamma wished her

to have a confidential person about her. I mean that her ladyship was very young, and, in short, it was always understood that——"

"Dear me," ejaculated Mrs. Blackstone again, "now that is quite a curious coincidence, is it not, Phemy? perhaps," she added, turning to the lady's-maid, "you are not aware that I am requiring you for my daughter under very similar circumstances—in fact, on the occasion of her marriage—to—to——" (human nature could not contain it)—"to Sir Felix Bohun of Bohun Court."

"I know Bohun Court, ma'am," was the quiet reply.

Mrs. Blackstone looked puzzled. "Really! how do you know it?"

"In the time of the first Lady Bohun, we used to stay there, ma'am—also in the time of the second Lady Bohun, who was a cousin of Lady Merivale's."

Mrs. Blackstone was silent from pure astonishment. Either this was a very singular coincidence, or else the young woman must have heard of Sir Felix's projected marriage, and offered herself, on the chance, to Lady Bohun the third.

Euphemia sat colouring to the tips of her fingers. She could not quite make up her mind as to whether it would be quite pleasant to have a person about her who had actually known both the former wives. Yet how nice-looking she was! so simple, so neat, so quiet, and so ladylike.

"A person I might even walk out with," she thought to herself; "yet still——"

Mrs. Blackstone was in very much the same dilemma. She wanted to ascertain her daughter's sentiments, but in the presence of the third person she felt this was impossible. She must get the young woman out of the room somehow, but not out of the house, for fear of losing her. A person with such recommendations would not be long in finding a situation; so, as the next train to town would not start for another hour, she would offer her a cup of tea, and in the mean time confer with Euphemia and Mr. Blackstone. Unfortunately Sir Felix, who could no doubt have told them all about her, was down at Bohun Court, making the final preparations.

"Well," said she, after this mental colloquy, "I should

like just to think over the subject for a little while with my daughter, and as the train does not return to town for an hour or more, it will also give us both time to remember anything we may have omitted to mention. I did not ask you your name?"

"Mira Ponsford, ma'am."

Poor Mrs. Blackstone having already given utterance to her astonishment on two previous occasions during this interview, and been reproved for such a breach of decorum and dignity by a fire of looks from the bright eyes of her daughter, she was afraid to utter the "good gracious" which was on her lips, but she paused, nevertheless.

"Mira?" she said, interrogatively, "is that the name by which you have been in the habit of being called? because——"

A very faint smile trembled on the lips of the lady's-maid.

"I have always been called Ponsford, ma'am," was her answer, and there was just sufficient intonation of reproof in her voice as she spoke, to make Miss Blackstone exclaim, "*Of course*, mamma," and carry her mother emphatically out of the room.

Before the next train started for London, Ponsford was engaged as the future Lady Bohun's maid, and on talking it over, all parties seemed pleased. Mr. Blackstone had of course a few words to say against it, but he was so much accustomed to being "put down," that he thought nothing of any objection he might advance being immediately negatived.

He did not quite like the idea of Phemy's being attended by a person who seemed "high,"—he had no pride, and though he was certainly elated at the match his daughter was so unexpectedly making, he did not hold his head a bit the higher for it, nor did he wish people to think better of him for it. Now these were sentiments which were very distasteful to both his wife and daughter. Phemy was going to move in a new sphere, and so they both thought that the people about her ought to belong to that raised sphere also.

"Ponsford looks the sort of person who would be quite a comfort to Phemy," said her mother; and Phemy added, "And save me such a world of trouble, knowing so well all

about Bohun Court, and the sort of people who have been in the habit of staying there."

Mr. Blackstone said "Humph!" but did not look convinced. He thought forty rather old too.

"Oh dear no!" cried Mrs. Blackstone; "not when the person has all the appearance of youth to add to the experience of age."

In short, it was decided that Ponsford was to be the person, and so Mr. Blackstone forbore to urge any further objections. He had only a few words to say by way of humble caution before the subject entirely dropped, and these were,

"Well, my dear, whatever you think conducive to your comfort and happiness shall of course be done, only my old mother used to say, and I believe very truly, be master or mistress of your establishment whatever be your station in life. Be kind, but preserve your supremacy; no tyranny like the tyranny of a servant!"

CHAPTER II.

WHAT did Mr. Blackstone, good easy man, gain by his interference in domestic matters? What does anybody ever gain for giving the advice for which they are solicited? Nothing. He had been consulted, it is true; that compliment had certainly been paid him, but his opinions had not met with that respect and obedience which one would have expected, considering that it was generally supposed Mrs. and Miss Blackstone never did anything without "consulting Mr. Blackstone."

Phemy Blackstone was young, gay, and very pretty; full of health and spirits, exuberant with happiness, words of advice and caution fell lightly on her ear, and the future was to her nothing but a still brighter phase of what had ever been to her a bright existence. All her life long, her father and mother had lived but for her, and now another devoted heart was a toy in her hands. All her life

long she had been nursed in wealth and luxury; now rank was to be added to these advantages. In truth, it was enough to turn a young girl's head; it was as if the cup were full of prosperity to the very brim, and as for any drawback, how could that be?

"How odd papa is!" were all the thanks the tender, loving, anxious old man—for both he and the mother were old for so young a daughter—got for his pains. "How very odd he is! What an idea about my not being mistress of everything, and about the tyranny of a servant, too, mamma. What did he mean?"

"Oh! I know that old story so well," said Mrs. Blackstone, smiling. "From the very day your papa and I married, that old sentence of his has been ready for every occasion."

"But why, mamma? How? How can any servant tyrannize? What does he mean?"

"My dear, there was an old story, something that always made my blood run cold, of a clerk, an old, old man, too, in your grandfather's counting-house, who gained such an ascendancy in the family that their very souls hardly appeared to be their own, so fearful was his influence, and their dread of him. At your grandfather's death-bed the scenes were so dreadful that, your papa says, they have haunted him ever since. Had not your papa worked hard—slaved, indeed—for the fortune we are blessed with, he would have been a poor man up to this day for all that his father left him! Not a farthing of your grandfather's property was secured, except a large annuity to this old man, and yet I have heard your papa say the life he led him—ah, well!"

"But, mamma, that was a man. No woman could ever exercise tyranny?—a woman, or a maid-servant rather, could never be in a position——"

"Oh! no, my dear; don't think any more of it. You have not heard the expression so often as I have, or it would not make any impression. But now, about Ponsford. We must arrange about her coming."

Yes, time was getting on. The *trousseau* was coming home day by day, and day by day, too, the excitement grew greater. Friends flocked in. The Laurels was positively besieged, and every one was charmed with the Bohun

diamonds, reset, not for the third time, but for the first ! The two former Ladies Bohun had been content to wear them as they were, proud of their purity, delighted when people called them *rococo*.

Not so the third Lady Bohun. "Dear Sir Felix, I like modern settings so much better—might I have just the ear-rings reset? Are you angry at my presumption? Have you any fancy for this antiquated style?"

So spake the fair *fiancée*, and what could the happy man reply, but that nothing in her could be presumption, and that he lived but to study her pleasure and happiness. The consequence was, all the diamonds were sent to Turner's, where all the Bohuns had dealt for generations, and drawings and designs were to be forwarded to Miss Blackstone.

Sir Felix was very little at The Laurels, he had so much business on his hands, but he wrote a letter to his fair Euphemia regularly every day, sometimes twice a day, and she read them the moment she had time.

One of the bridesmaids-to-be commented one day on this stoicism, and the fair Euphemia's reply was, that she was not a literary character. She could not bear reading or writing, and reading a letter was next worse to writing one.

"But does not Sir Felix expect you to answer his epistles?"

"Oh! yes; and I do."

"What, without reading his?"

"Oh! I tell you how I manage. If I have been so busy that I have not had an instant to read his last two or three, I write him one crossed all over, and end in a clear place in a fine bold hand, 'your own loving Phemy,' and he is quite satisfied. Men never read crossed letters, so I know I am safe; and, to tell you a secret, he is what he calls rather near-sighted. I know what sort of near-sightedness it is, but never mind—dear old fellow! he sees how to choose jewels wonderfully well, and that is the sort of sight that pleases *me*, my dear!"

"Lucky Phemy!" sighed her friend; "you must give us all a helping hand when you ascend the throne. Are there no more of the same family? no brothers?"

"One brother," said Euphemia, carelessly, "only one—a younger brother, of course, but I don't know anything

about him; he will not signify much to me, you know. I suppose he is in some sort of profession or other, and doubtless he will come to the wedding, but whether he is worth having or not, I cannot tell; I should say not, because a little bird whispered to me, that the Bohuns were never rich, but that both the first and second Lady Bohuns had large fortunes——"

"And the third, Phemy?"

"Ah! my dear, but the third does not mean to do what the first and second did! die first, and leave it all to Sir Felix! But, some day, I will ask all about his young brother, never fear; and if I find it worth while sending for you to Bohun Court, depend upon it I will; and now about the bonnets——"

Miss Blackstone was a young lady gifted with a great flow of conversation, and this had hitherto been the music in which the ears of her parents chiefly delighted. To herself, also, at the present crisis, there was no theme on which she so loved to dilate, with all the powers of language, as that of her future prospects, so she talked incessantly of them, morning, noon, and night, to every friend she had, and as the prosperous of this world have many friends, the name of her listeners was Legion. It was only in strictest confidence, when their backs were fairly turned on The Laurels, that these bosom friends ventured to whisper amongst themselves, "Did you ever know any one half so absurd as Phemy Blackstone? the girl's head is turned!"

But there was one person to whom Phemy talked without the slightest misgiving as to whether her wrapt attention and sympathy were interested or not; one person who entered into all her projects, assisted her by word and by act, and with noiseless rapidity arranged the whole of the elaborate *trousseau*, and disposed it away in the various boxes without ever asking where should that go, or what should be done with this.

Many of Phemy's young friends had an eye to some of the cast-off bracelets and much of the bijouterie which the Lady Bohun-to-be now considered beneath her notice; she was sharp enough to see all that, and a great deal more, in all those who crowded round her, save one—this one was Ponsford, the new maid, who arrived at The Laurels a

week before the wedding, and who, as soon as her bonnet was off, seemed to enter upon her duties as though she had been Miss Blackstone's maid all her life.

Phemy was delighted with her, and the first day that Sir Felix arrived in town, and came out to The Laurels to dine, she began to expatiate, with her usual fluency, on the merits of Ponsford.

"And, dear Sir Felix" (she always called him 'dear Sir Felix;' he had begged her to call him Felix, but her merry young lips had never been able to achieve the feat), "dear Sir Felix, she knows all about you and Bohun Court; only think!"

The thought brought a shadow over the brow of Sir Felix in a moment, and he paused before he answered.

"I never even heard her name," said he, at last.

"Then you are a wicked, forgetful, ungrateful man, for she holds you in the greatest respect and admiration."

"Ponsford, Ponsford?—No. I can think of no one of that name."

"Mira Ponsford; does that help you? A tall, slight woman, very fair, very calm and concentrated (mamma calls her) in her manners; wonderful eyes, so deep, and steady, and searching; a low, clear voice, just like a stage whisper, and without being the least handsome, a face that clings to your memory."

"Not to mine, then, fair enthusiast," said Sir Felix, smiling; "and I only hope no accomplished impostor has practised on your credulity, for I certainly have not the honour of her acquaintance."

"Now, that is very odd," persisted Euphemia; "there must be some mistake, and the mistake, dear Sir Felix, must be yours. She was maid to a Lady Mary Topham, who was a daughter of —"

"Oh!" interrupted Sir Felix, "I used to know all the Tophams well. Topham himself is a hunting man in my county, and my intimate friend. Oh, I see! Yes, yes! Of course she has been at Bohun Court in the lifetime of Lady Mary."

"Yes; and of Lady Merivale, her mother," said Euphemia.

"No doubt, no doubt—but I never saw her; however, I dare say it is all right, and I hope she may prove a

perfect treasure for your sake ; but as to her acquaintance, that I am reluctantly obliged to ignore, for I never even heard her name."

"Now, that puzzles me," continued the pertinacious bride, who was one of those people who will wear a subject threadbare, "because she seems to know you so well —"

All at once a light appeared to break in upon Sir Felix's mind, and he raised his hand with a gesture of sudden intelligence.

"I know!" he exclaimed, "I know now! How could I be so stupid as to forget? I perfectly remember the person you mean ; not by sight, but by reputation."

At this word Mrs. Blackstone became on the *qui vive*.

"Dear me, Sir Felix—good gracious!—I hope we have not been too precipitate? The character we received from Lady Merivale was so very satisfactory."

"Don't misunderstand me," said Sir Felix, when he could edge in a word ; "I have no doubt all is right, as I before said ; but what makes me remember her by reputation is, a name by which my brother always insisted on calling Lady Merivale's maid—your Ponsford, I imagine—and which used to make poor Lady Mary so angry. That name was so caught up at Bohun Court, that really it seemed quite to belong to the poor woman."

"And what was it?" asked Euphemia.

"The Vampire," said Sir Felix abruptly, and there was a dead pause. Mrs. Blackstone looked at her daughter, and the latter turned very pale.

"I wish," murmured she, looking down, and playing with her rings, "that you had not told me, Sir Felix. How extremely horrid."

Sir Felix laughed. It had been a joke of his brother's, he said, and had seemed so exactly to suit the young woman ; "though," added he, "I cannot, with truth, say I assented to the likeness from personal experience, only my guests used to say so, and Lady Mary used to scold my brother for drawing such a comparison for her favourite."

"Ah! then she was a favourite?"

"Oh! certainly she was. They could do nothing with-

out her. As for Lady Merivale—my dear Euphemia, you have never seen the countess, but I hope some day you will—I cannot think how she ever came to part with her, even to Lady Mary; still less can I guess why, when Lady Mary died, she did not go back to her old mistress; for, I assure you, it was a standing joke amongst us all, down at Bohun, that old Lady Merivale must fall to pieces were it not for the vampire!”

Euphemia was curious to know the reason. She was not much used to society—not used at all to the society of venerable grandees, compelled, by their position, to live on the face of the world, and to make the best of their appearance. What did Sir Felix mean by Lady Merivale’s falling to pieces?

“Because, my Euphemia”—and the baronet looked at his charming and unsophisticated piece of innocence with delighted eyes—“there never was any one, living and breathing, so completely made up as that old lady. My brother had a curious story about her.”

“Your brother seems fond of odd names and stories,” said Euphemia, rather pertly.

“He is very quaint and original,” smiled Sir Felix; “you will be charmed with him, my dear Euphemia.”

“And what was his curious story?” inquired the young lady, evasively.

“Oh, excellent! He happened to be staying at Lord Merivale’s once when there was an alarm of fire in the castle. The galleries were filled with smoke, and the rooms were filled with guests, who all flew down to the great hall in any attire they could find, but, strange to say, the countess was nowhere to be seen. Lady Mary was in hysterics, shrieking for her mother, and imploring every one to save her; whilst all the time the old lady was standing in the midst of them, not daring to confess herself, since not one of the twenty people who sat with her every day at dinner had an idea that there, in beauty unadorned, shorn of all her fair proportions, and minus all her ‘substitutions,’ as Gny used to call them, stood the Countess of Merivale herself!”

“And how did it end?” said Euphemia, quite angrily.

“By the vampire’s carrying her off in triumph, and de-

claring the next morning that her ladyship had escaped to the cellars before any of the household had heard the alarm given!"

"Ha!" exclaimed Mr. Blackstone, speaking for the first time after an hour's devoted attention to the conversation, "how fearful to be thus at the mercy of a dependant! of how many secrets these people often possess themselves, and what fatal use they might make of the power with which the possession invests them! I remember, in days gone by, my old mother used to say——"

"Oh, papa!" laughed Euphemia.

"Yes, my dear, my old mother used to say, no tyranny like the tyranny of a servant."

"And I can believe it, though I never experienced it," said Sir Felix; "at the same time, all this casts no reflection on Ponsford."

"Mamma," said the young lady, as she went upstairs, with her arm round her mother's waist, when the evening closed, "I have a certain conviction, though I never saw him, and know nothing of him, that I shall *hate* Mr. Bohun!"

CHAPTER III.

TURN we now to another scene, a fairer scene than the suburban villa, in spite of its nineteenth-century elevation, and all its modern improvements; gaze now, ye eyes that love the old baronial halls of England, on that large, straggling pile of buildings, gray with age and green with ivy, and see what a grand old house Sir Felix Bohun called his home.

Here and there a turret, here and there a projection; windows of all sorts and all sizes; and the whole surrounded by a broad gravel terrace, from the centre of which sloped a broad flight of stone steps, then another gravel terrace, and another flight of steps; a third gravel terrace, and one last flight of steps—these leading to a wide park, studded with groups of trees, sheep under

some, and deer under others, and the grass pressed down into little narrow paths, not meant to be paths at all, but short cuts to different distant points, too pleasant and convenient for either Sir Felix or Mr. Bohun to do away with.

This was the back of Bohun Court. The entrance was on the gloomy side of the house, looking to the north; and there the stone courtyard, and the stone lions-rampant, and the massive iron-bound oaken door, kept up all the dignity of a baronial hall.

But to turn to the sunny side. On a bright, fresh morning in early spring, when the sun's rays fell so warmly on the breakfast-room that its long windows were open, a gentleman stepped out on the terrace, with an open letter in his hand, and looked anxiously across the park, as if watching for an expected visitor.

He had not to look long, for, taking advantage of one of the above-mentioned short cuts, another figure was soon seen emerging from an avenue of chestnuts, and wending its way along one of the little beaten tracks.

Mr. Bohun stood still and watched it advancing. As it approached nearer, his eyes seemed to wander to the landscape, and rest almost lovingly on its beauty. The haze of a spring morning, and an easterly breeze, was spread like a gauze veil over hill and dale, and over the Bohun woods, though the dark tops of the fir-trees peeped out here and there, and the wavy outline of distant downs became every moment more and more distinct.

Mr. Bohun stood without his hat, and on his forehead, high and somewhat bald, could be counted many more wrinkles than even the eyes of an enemy would have detected on that of Sir Felix. It was a face of extreme gentleness and benevolence; but though nature had given him a five years' advantage of his brother in point of youth, every one would have said the ages were reversed, and pronounce in favour of Sir Felix, for Mr. Bohun looked care-worn and old.

All his life long, Mr. Bohun had been the working brother, and Sir Felix the man of the gay world, born for society and pleasure, and carefully avoiding all the worries of every-day existence. Since these worries must fall to the lot of some one person in a family, even if not to all

the members, it so happened that destiny had laid them on the shoulders of Mr. Bohun. He managed the estate, hired the servants, heard the grievances, paid the bills, and would have laid down his life (metaphorically) for Bohun Court; so it was a labour of love, though a labour all the same.

And yet there had been two Lady Bohuns?—Yes. The first a fine lady, who looked upon the venerable house as a retreat for a fortnight at Easter and a few months in winter, and hated it all the rest of the year. The unobtrusive usefulness of Mr. Bohun gave her no sort of concern; it was nothing to her, except that it left Sir Felix at liberty to spend the springs in London and the summers abroad with her. Consequently, during her reign, he was acknowledged and authorized regent. Even down to the village children, more hats were doffed to Mr. Bohun than ever little ragged brims were pulled to Sir Felix.

Then came the second Lady Bohun. She was a confirmed invalid. Wealth and beauty had been hers, but health had been denied her. To her Mr. Bohun was the most devoted of brothers. Sir Felix was invariably kind and good to her, but in her state of health she could not tie him down to Bohun Court—it was so dull for him—all very well when the house was full of company, for the hunting season, for instance, or for the pheasants; but in the dull season, when he had always been accustomed to gad about, she would not, for worlds, condemn him to a quietude which depressed him—no; he should go and amuse himself.

“Guy and I will keep house; we shall do very well; and you will come back and refresh us with all the news, which will suit us far better than entering into the gaiety ourselves.”

And so the regency went on during all the lingering years of the second Lady Bohun's fragile existence, and to her Mr. Bohun was the greatest of comforts, her counsellor, her almoner, her companion, and her friend.

Day by day, all day long if she liked, Mr. Bohun was at her beck and call to take her orders and do her commissions, light as air as they always were!—to walk by the side of her garden chair, and guide its diminutive pony through the paths to all her favourite flower beds, or else

to the doors of the cottages which she regularly visited. It was his study, his happiness, and his pastime to make those suffering years pass as pleasantly to her as possible; and when, at last, the garden-chair became too great an exertion, and Lady Bohun was reduced to her sofa, the very lawn in front of her morning room was cut up and laid out under *her* direction, and *his* superintendence, that to the last she might inhale the fragrance she so loved, and die in the midst of her favourite occupations; and this, in fact, she did, and Sir Felix became this time, in reality, a disconsolate widower.

- And Mr. Bohun, did he not miss her? Yes! every hour of his busy day; for, whilst Sir Felix went abroad for change and consolation, *he* remained at his post, haunted by her presence, and living to execute, to the utmost of his power, every wish that she had ever expressed when the scene was closing to her.

And now people really looked upon Mr. Bohun as safe. He had been heir presumptive (not heir presumptuous) for five-and-forty years; now they said *he* might surely be called heir apparent, and not a voice in all the country round but cordially exclaimed they hoped it might be so. In fact, Sir Felix himself had given it out he never intended to marry again; and he went abroad, and ran the gauntlet of every sort of temptation, and came home again still free, resolved to settle down at Bohun Court, and share with his brother the care of an estate which the love of his lost wife had hallowed.

Business, however, connected with his possessions, took him up to town. Now let us go back to the figure advancing towards Mr. Bohun with outstretched hands, the figure of a gray-haired man, his long locks streaming in the air, a set colour in his thin, worn cheeks, and a white neck-cloth to betoken his vocation.

"My dear friend, my dear Mr. Bohun! I have made all the haste I possibly could; and my anxiety has given wings to my feet. I see a letter in your hand—confirmation or refutation? Tell me, in a word, is the rumour true?"

The panting breathlessness of the speaker drew a hearty laugh from Mr. Bohun.

"Perfectly true," said he, cheerfully; "and five pages,

four of them crossed, full of excuses, which are perfectly unnecessary from my brother, inasmuch as I had no possible right to demand them, no more than I wish him to make them. The rumour is quite true. Sir Felix is really going to be married again, and this is the announcement."

Mr. Bohun held up the letter, and the Rector of Bohun sat down on a bench, overpowered by his feelings.

"I did not think it, I would not believe it," said he, at last, as he flourished his pocket-handkerchief in the air; "and I said to my wife, this very morning, Mary, no one but Mr. Bohun shall tell me of it!"

"And Mr. Bohun himself tells you, my good friend," said the heir presumptive, descending from his temporary pedestal with all the equanimity of his character; "indeed, I am not knocked down by the blow, not half so much as you appear yourself! cheer up, and remember that twice before this has happened, and each time I have been so fortunate as not to be separated from you. It is only the old story over again!"

"Yes, but the risk, the risk!" ejaculated the old clergyman, shaking his head; "who knows what revolution the step may occasion? My dear friend, if we lost you, what should we do? How can we spare you if circumstances should require you to give us less of your personal and moral support?"

"Twice before the same risk has been run," said Mr. Bohun, "and still here I am amongst you. Twice before I have played the part of a brother to my brother's wife, and I see no just cause why my third essay should prove less successful than hitherto."

"Ah! my dear sir," persisted the old clergyman, "it is, as I said before, the risk! the risk! and at Sir Felix's time of life, too! Dear me! who would have thought it?"

"I," said Mr. Bohun, firmly; "and I always have thought it—that my brother was not the man to settle down quietly as a widower. As for his time of life, he is still what the world would call a young man; that is to say, a middle-aged man; and middle-aged men, my dear Mr. Melville, do not approve of being put on the shelf merely because they happen to be widowers."

But Mr. Melville was not to be consoled. He had made up his mind, in common with all the neighbourhood, that

Bohun Court was never again to see a Lady Bohun—a Mrs. Bohun would have been welcomed as a novelty ; but to see Sir Felix bring home another bride, and to have to “ make her acquaintance,” as the saying is, was a trial of fortitude.

“ And then for it all to happen so suddenly ! ” continued Mr. Melville ; “ it really came upon us like a thunderbolt, this rumour.”

“ Rumour, with her many tongues, pointed them all at Bohun Court,” laughed Mr. Bohun, seemingly resolved to turn the whole affair into rather a pleasant occurrence than anything else ; “ but the singular part of it all is, that, for once in a way, rumour has hit upon the truth.”

“ But how did it happen ? Had you any idea when Sir Felix went up to town ? How did this young lady, if it is a young lady, contrive to make so sudden an impression ? ” were a few amongst the numerous questions which poured from the lips of the anxious Rector of Bohun.

“ Sit down a moment by my side,” said Mr. Bohun, leading the old gentleman to a rustic bench on the grass under one of the clumps of old elms ; “ sit down and hear the very small cause from which this great event sprung. In the first place, you must know, that my brother went to town on money matters ; that it was absolutely necessary he should see his man of business without half an hour’s delay ; that not finding him at his office, he pursued him all over the City, and on returning late in despair to his office, found he had just left it for good, and had started for the station ; you must also know, by the way, that this happy man of business possesses a villa in the suburbs with quite a reputation for beauty and luxury. But to proceed : guess the small cause of this new phase in the destiny of Sir Felix ! ”

“ My dear friend, I am all attention ; but I never could guess it in all my life—not even the riddle about the first nail in the ark, which every young lady makes a point of asking me in compliment to my cloth—much less can I guess to what you are leading.”

“ Well, then, the small cause was this, the stopping of my brother’s watch ! A clerk happened to be just leaving the office as Sir Felix drove up ! he announced that Mr. Blackstone had just driven off, that he always went home to dinner, that he always dined and slept at The Laurels.

Now this was a delay which might have put my brother to the greatest inconvenience, and, in fact, somehow or other, he *must* see Mr. Blackstone that night, and so it struck him that the best thing he could do would be to follow him down to the station—it was merely an interview of a few minutes that was required—he might catch him before he started. At what time did he go? At 5-45. Sir Felix looked at his watch, and jumped into the first Hansom. He reached the station exactly as the first gate was being closed, and saw Mr. Blackstone rushing towards the carriages. To rush after him, and to spring into a vacant seat by his side, was the work of a moment—in another he was steaming towards The Laurels——”

“Well, then, the watch had not stopped?” exclaimed Mr. Melville.

“We have not come to that,” returned Mr. Bohun; “we must now only imagine ourselves walking up the hill to this suburban villa, Sir Felix laughing at the adventure, and Mr. Blackstone pressing him to stay and dine, assuring him that there was a train back again at a quarter after nine o’clock, which would just suit him; and so the unbidden guest remained, and was presented to Mrs. Blackstone, and last, not least, to Miss Blackstone, and it seems that the charms and accomplishments of the latter—for I am told she sings like any nightingale—made the two hours pass like two minutes, although my brother affirms most seriously that he never had an idea of losing that 9-15 train. At twenty minutes before nine he looked at his watch, and as Miss Blackstone had just begun another song, he calculated that he could hear it out, and then he sily looked at it again. It seems the beauty of the singer and her song had completely put out of his head the hour at which the hands had pointed when he looked last, for seeing they now indicated a quarter to nine, he calmly and gratefully took his leave, intending to walk down to the station with his host. Mr. Blackstone seemed fidgety, and remarked that they must walk fast; but my brother assured him there was no hurry, and persisted in taking his time. The consequence was, that when they reached the station all was silent. ‘We are much too soon,’ said Sir Felix. We have lost the train, thought Mr. Blackstone, and so it proved. That night my brother slept at The Laurels, and spent the

greater part of the next day there. This was his first visit, but not his last by many and many. The result of these visits you know. He announces it in this letter, and says he is coming down here next week to make a few necessary arrangements."

Mr. Bohun paused, and both he and the Rector sat in silence for some time, each fully occupied with his own thoughts.

"Then the lady is handsome," said Mr. Melville, at last.

"So my brother says."

"And shall you go to the wedding?"

"I conclude my brother will wish it."

"And afterwards?"

"Oh! return home, I suppose, and get ready for them. There is so much to be done here before the old house can be made fit for the reception of a gay young bride. The best rooms have not been opened for more than two years, and we have let dust and mould gather a good deal about cherished relics, which, I conclude, had better now be swept away——"

"Memories and all?" sighed Mr. Melville.

"Ah! no; never the memories!" exclaimed Mr. Bohun; "were fifty Lady Bohuns to succeed the last in this old house, *her* memory would live in it, and *her* presence haunt it, just as if her spirit were permitted to return and remind me that though lost, she need not be forgotten."

"I hope it may be so," said the old clergyman, "and I hope past habits and customs and memories may all be retained by the lady whom Sir Felix has chosen."

"I do not doubt it," said Mr. Bohun, rising, "because I believe my brother incapable of selecting any one so devoid of good feeling and good taste as to harbour that most pitiful of human weaknesses, jealousy of the dead."

CHAPTER IV.

MR. BOHUN felt rather nervous and fidgety the day that Sir Felix was expected down at Bohun Court; and as whatever Mr. Bohun felt was always felt by the whole household, no one seemed able to settle to anything that day. It was a positive relief when the hoofs of the carriage horses were heard clattering into the court-yard, and Sir Felix's heavy tread sounded in the hall, for then it was over.

There was an awkwardness on both sides when the brothers met, but most on the side of Sir Felix. Mr. Bohun's grasp of the hand was warm and hearty, but his brother's eyes met his with an anxious look, as if to say, had they dared, "Have I made a fool of myself?"

No such accusation, however, welcomed him. The same open, frank cordiality which was Mr. Bohun's characteristic did not fail him now, and when the first few hours were over—the hours of explanations almost amounting to apologies—the brothers once more stood on precisely the same footing towards each other as ever, with only one slight difference, which was, that it seemed to both as if years, and not weeks, had elapsed since last they parted, the great intervening circumstance appearing to fill up so large a space of time.

To any casual observer, it would have seemed next to absurd to talk of putting Bohun Court in order for the reception of the new guest, so well appointed were all the stately rooms; but Mr. Bohun soon found that his brother had not returned in the same contented state of mind in which he had left home. The "best rooms," as the old housekeeper so proudly called them, were now ordered to be opened, and one bright morning, followed by this ancient servant and Mr. Bohun, Sir Felix made the tour of inspection. But in vain did the old lady expatiate on the carpets, and turn up the corners of the chintz covers, to show how handsome the yellow satin looked underneath. Sir Felix grumbled—the sun happened unfortunately to be shining brightly, and the bridegroom elect made no allowance for the dust and cobwebs of two years' seclusion from

light—he called the carpets faded, and the yellow satin gaudy, and whispered to Mr. Bohun that “*She* detested yellow—she wished the drawing-rooms to be crimson.”

“Then you will be obliged to have new carpets—these will not look well with crimson,” said his brother, inwardly marvelling the while at the premature interest exhibited by the future mistress of the house.

“True—so we shall, replied Sir Felix composedly, and from the drawing-rooms he went on to the dining-room, then to the bedrooms, then to the attics, and descended the stairs exclaiming, to the intense mortification of Mrs. Dance, the housekeeper, “All very dingy—there must be a thorough clean out, and clear out too.”

And it was not Mrs. Dance alone who was mortified at the remarks and behaviour of her master—it was not she alone who looked and listened, surprised and dismayed: his brother, who followed in silence, was no less struck with the metamorphose in Sir Felix than herself, and more than once his astonishment nearly found utterance in the Shakesperian exclamation, “Thou art translated!”

Yes, Sir Felix *was* translated. He was a new man, with certainly a new pair of eyes, for Bohun Court was no longer fair in his sight, the rooms no longer grand and stately, the furniture no longer handsome—everything was dingy!

Dingy! Mr. Bohun could hardly believe his ears. Dingy! with what then could he be mentally comparing it?

Poor Mr. Bohun. What could he know about it? what could a vegetating bachelor know of modern improvements? of carpets in which your feet were buried—of chairs where you might sleep a night through, so roomy and so luxurious—of curtains which looked like the costly twilled silk of a lady's dress, and which perhaps our great great grandmothers would have worn as one—in short, what could *he* know of comfort, luxury, and taste, who had never seen even the outside of the suburban villa, or heard the name and fame of The Laurels?

And now the survey of the whole house had been taken, all save one room, and it was with a visible shrinking that Sir Felix saw Mrs. Dance single out a key tied with a bow of red ribbon, and turn it in-the lock.

This was a small room unconnected with the suite of drawing-rooms, library, and dining-room. It was at the southern side of the house, and looked upon a flower-garden cut into innumerable beds, excepting just under the wide bay-window, and there there was a broad border in which were all the clusters of violets and lilies of the valley. Climbing up the window was a passion flower, throwing out its long creepers amongst the nailed-up branches of a luxuriant jessamine, and here and there a tuft of that curious brown stock which only exhales its exquisite scent at night.

They were now in this room, and Mr. Bohun walked hastily to the window the moment they entered. Sir Felix stood still, and looked round without uttering a syllable. This was a room filled with innumerable relics of the past. This was the last Lady Bohun's own boudoir, where she had spent all her latest hours. On that sofa she had passed the suffering time; in that chair, when breath was failing her, had she been placed by Mr. Bohun, and breathed her last sigh upon his cheek. On the grass under that window, were still the four patches worn away by the wheels of her garden chair.

Suddenly Mr. Bohun turned. "You will have nothing touched here?" said he to his brother, in a tone partly of entreaty, partly interrogatory. "You need not," he continued, seeing that Sir Felix hesitated. "This is a very small room—it will not be wanted—it does not interfere with the suite—the octagon room between the drawing-rooms will make a perfect lady's boudoir. Do not touch *this* room, Felix!"

Sir Felix gulped down a feeling that rose in his throat, and turned away.

"Do what you like here," said he, with an effort; "take it as your own, Guy. You have a natural affection for the room, and you deserve to appropriate it. Remember, Mrs. Dance, that should Mr. Bohun be absent when the workmen come down to do up the house, the key is to be turned upon that room, and no step but my brother's enter within that door."

Mrs. Dance curtsied low, and, looking at Mr. Bohun, coloured tearfully, as Sir Felix strode away.

"I'm glad, sir," said she, in a faltering voice, "I'm very

glad Sir Felix gives up this room to you. I was so afraid it was to be all new done like the rest. Is there anything you would please to have altered, sir?"

No; Mr. Bohun gave the strictest injunctions on this point. Not a chair, nor a table, nor an ornament was to be moved.

"I shall bring down a few things from my den upstairs, Mrs. Dance—just my books, and my stuffed birds, and some of the pictures—perhaps I shall bring everything. Yes—I think you may possess yourself of my den, Mrs. Dance, and make a lumber room of it. I like this room—I love it—it is my whole home, and here I shall live, and be in nobody's way. Mrs. Dance, if you bring any paint, and paper, and whitewashing into it, I never will forgive you. I think you understand me?"

"Oh, sir!" exclaimed the old lady, tottering away; "trust me, trust me. I understand you perfectly; I feel as you do yourself."

So now the worst was over, except the final conversation between Sir Felix and Mr. Bohun, as to whether the latter should continue to make Bohun Court his home. Mr. Bohun urged that such an arrangement might not be agreeable, and hinted at chambers in the Albany. Sir Felix scouted the idea, and declared that Bohun Court could not go on without his brother, and the argument raged fiercely till the bridegroom conquered, and the bachelor gave way.

And when this was settled all seemed smooth. Sir Felix started for London, and Mr. Bohun was to follow in a week, to see and be presented to the bride elect, and become acquainted with her. The newly-married couple were then to go abroad, and Mr. Bohun was to return home to make ready for their reception when they came back towards autumn.

CHAPTER V.

Time had now arrived to within a few days of the wedding. Mr. Blackstone had got through the elaborate settlements which had made his daughter mistress of forty thousand pounds, independent of her expectations; and Mrs. Blackstone had achieved the *trousseau*, and seen it all laid out for exhibition. The bride was in a great state of excitement, arranging affairs of much greater importance—namely, the procession of the bridesmaids, and their programme of behaviour. Also, Ponsford was in full force, regularly installed as lady's-maid, and doing the honours of the millinery and jewellery with great effect. All Mrs. Blackstone's circle were very much awed and impressed with her manners on the occasion, and even Euphemia allowed herself to be guided by her in every respect.

"Ponsford," she exclaimed, running into her room early one morning, "put me out something very smart. We are going to spend the day at the Crystal Palace, and Mr. Bohun is to see me there for the first time. What had I better wear?"

"Not anything very smart, ma'am," was Ponsford's reply, "if you wish to make a favourable impression on Mr. Bohun."

Euphemia's clear blue eyes grew into a circle.

"Why?" she exclaimed; "is he so very difficult to please? A man of his age!"

"Oh, ma'am!" said the maid, with a smile, "he may not be a very young gentleman; but I have heard the ladies at Bohun Court say they were more particular about their dress when Mr. Bohun was at home, than when they dressed for London dinners in the season."

Euphemia bit her lips and pouted.

"Do you think he really is a judge?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am! that I *know*."

"What style of people—I mean dress—does he admire?"

Ponsford began first by describing what she imagined to be Mr. Bohun's style of beauty, and did it so adroitly that Euphemia looked in the glass with a proud smile on

her lips. She flattered herself the difficult man would have little fault to find with his brother's taste in *that* respect!

Meanwhile, her maid was spreading out a very handsome light brown silk dress, of a shade approaching fawn. "Oh, Ponsford!" cried the young lady, "not that quakerish thing! I mean that for country walks in the dust and the mud. Give me the Eugénie blue for to-day."

"Miss Blackstone, this pale brown, with your Spanish mantilla, and that lovely lilac crape bonnet which came last night, would, I assure you, be in better taste for the occasion than the bright blue."

"Why?" exclaimed Euphemia, firing up. "I should think I knew pretty well what ought to be worn at the Crystal Palace!"

"Of course, ma'am," replied Ponsford, hastily. "I did not mean that. I meant, considering your present position, ma'am; and also, since you rather wished, I thought, to wear something according to Mr. Bohun's taste. Engaged young ladies," she added, seeing a frown gathering on Euphemia's brow, "always attract so much attention."

"So they do," interrupted the bride elect; "so perhaps, after all, I had better look rather quiet than otherwise. Very well. I will wear the brown silk. That gorgeous mantilla will set it off. Do you know, Ponsford, that Sir Felix gave forty guineas for that mantilla?"

"I dare say, ma'am. I know they are very expensive."

"How do you know? I thought they were very rare. Sir Felix said so."

"So they are, as handsome as this, ma'am."

"Do you know how to put it on, Ponsford?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am!"

"Are you sure? Because Sir Felix said there was a particular way."

"I know quite well, ma'am."

"But how do you know so well?"

"Lady Mary wore one constantly, ma'am."

"Oh!" Miss Blackstone was satisfied. And then she continued, "But, Ponsford, about Mr. Bohun—is he like Sir Felix?"

"Not the least, ma'am. Mr. Bohun looks much older; more like a country gentleman, too. He has quite a dif-

ferent sort of manner and voice, and he has a very decided way of speaking."

"Good-looking?"

"Not so handsome as Sir Felix, ma'am."

"I wonder why he never married?"

"I cannot say, ma'am. I never heard of his paying any lady attention. Lady Mary used to say he was the most unsusceptible person she ever met. Besides, ma'am, he is so comfortable at Bohun Court."

"But that cannot be like his own home," said Euphemia.

"By the bye, I wonder where his own home is?"

"Bohun Court, ma'am," said Ponsford, slightly pinching in her lips.

There was a pause. A red flush came over Euphemia's face, and she paused in the operation of pulling out a bow with her bonnet-strings. The flush heightened to a glow. Something was stirring in her mind, and she breathed quicker than before. Ponsford was deeply engrossed with the folding of the Spanish mantilla.

How was it that that "something" had never stirred in Euphemia's mind before? "How was it," thought she to herself, "that I never dreamt of asking Sir Felix if Mr. Bohun always lived at Bohun Court? Perhaps he does not: I shall not like it if he does. I always thought Sir Felix had no 'encumbrances' (as Fanny Washington calls relations) about the house. I must find it all out. I remember, when the Washingtons came to congratulate, Mrs. Washington particularly said how completely I should be mistress at Bohun Court, just as if Sir Felix had been a bachelor; but if I am to have a fidgety, difficult man always watching me, planted there for life (for evidently he is a regular old bachelor), I shall not like it at all. I'll ask Sir Felix cleverly—perhaps Mr. Bohun only comes for the country seasons—if I don't like him, I can coax Sir Felix up to town at those times; at all events, I'll sound Sir Felix this very day."

By this time the mantilla was ready. It was placed over the graceful shoulders after the most approved fashion, and Euphemia descended to the drawing-room.

There was one difference between the feelings with which she descended the staircase, and those with which she had mounted them. *Then* she said Mr. Bohun was to see

her for the first time; now she felt that she was going to see him.

"Well!" exclaimed Mrs. Blackstone, as her daughter entered the room, "I do think, my dear, that is the very prettiest bonnet I ever saw. But, surely, you are very plainly dressed? I should have thought that lovely blue silk would have been more the thing?"

"Ponsford said not, mamma;" replied the young lady, whose temper had received a shock a few minutes before, and had not recovered; "Ponsford said it was too smart for the occasion."

"Too smart? good gracious, dear child! when I declare I have seen the Duchess of — there in almost a ball-dress!"

"Perhaps so, mamma, but Ponsford knows so perfectly what people ought to wear; she meant that *in my position* I ought not to make such a show, and my dress is very handsome though it is quiet."

At that instant wheels were heard on the gravel, and Sir Felix sprang out of the basket carriage, with its two spirited little ponies, in which he was to have the privilege of driving Miss Blackstone to Sydenham.

No sooner had he entered the room, than Mrs. Blackstone called his attention to her daughter's Spanish mantilla.

"Does it not look magnificent, Sir Felix?—is it not becoming?"

"Yes," was his reply, as his eyes took a gratified survey of the lady of his choice; "but we must not bestow all the praise on the mantilla. It is a pleasure to give Euphemia anything pretty, for she does such credit to it. Her whole dress to-day is *fait-à-peindre*."

The young girl laughed, but gave her mother a sly glance at the same time. It was Ponsford's taste, and Ponsford's triumph; and whilst the daughter was simply pleased at it, the mother was silent from feeling obliged, somewhat reluctantly, to acknowledge it.

A large party went in Mrs. Blackstone's suite to the Crystal Palace that day. She had engaged a room for thirty, instead of disarranging The Laurels before the wedding, when a still larger number of friends were invited to breakfast.

Amongst the most intimate of these friends ranked the Washingtons, very wealthy people of the same sphere as the Blackstones.

Mrs. Washington had several daughters, and Fanny, with a younger sister, were to be two of the bridesmaids. It was Fanny for whom Miss Blackstone had laughingly promised to send, should she find that Mr. Bohun was "worth having." It was, consequently, Fanny, who, on this day of the grand Crystal Palace party, was in agonies (to use her own forcible expression) to see her probable "*futur*," so the Washingtons were at the place of rendezvous, by the statue of Cain, long before any one else had arrived.

Some went in carriages, some went on horseback, some by train; but these were chiefly the gentlemen of the party, whose occupations obliged them to spend their mornings in town. There was no want of money in that pretty suburb of London. Houses and carriages all bore equally the unmistakable stamp of wealth, from the well-appointed barouche of Mrs. Washington with its handsome bays, down to Euphemia's own basket carriage with its soft blue velvet cushions.

And their dress! the costly silks that stood alone! the pink and blue parasols covered with real point; the white ones with coral drops all the way round; the lovely bonnets covered with real Mechlin! Every one had been anxious to do honour to that party, and certainly Mrs. Blackstone's guests did that day make a most refulgent show.

At last the bride-elect and her intended arrived, the former tired and dusty, although so muffled up, for fear of the sun and dust, that no one could have imagined how slender a figure all those summer wraps concealed until she emerged from them.

Fanny Washington came up to her immediately.

"My dear," she whispered, "I have been looking everywhere for a young likeness of Sir Felix, and can see nobody at all likely."

"I dare say not," said Euphemia, "for everybody says he looks ten years older;" and her quick eye ran over the assembled party.

No; certainly there was no one there who could be Mr. Bohun. She did not like remarking upon his absence to

Sir Felix; it was making his brother of too much importance; besides, she had been talking conversation to him for two hours, beating about the bush to find out all she could without deliberately asking the plain question, "Is Bohun Court his home?" and she was tired, nervous, too, for there was a little shadow of annoyance in Sir Felix's manner at some of her questions which showed her that she was treading on dangerous ground, so she had learnt nothing, but, on the contrary, had been obliged to give the subject up altogether.

"However," thought she, as the party began now to disperse and look about them, "I shall get on better with the individual himself when he appears. I shall not be afraid of him."

Meanwhile, as they wandered about, Mrs. Washington came to walk and talk confidentially with Mrs. Blackstone. She had married three daughters herself, and was, therefore, quite *au fait* in such matters. She was full of delight at "dear Phemy's" good fortune and happiness, but thought her looking rather pale and nervous. Possibly it was the lilac bonnet, which was always trying, or probably the prospect of being introduced to her future husband's relations. That was always a great trial for a young girl, and she knew from experience how glad all the brides she ever knew were when that part of the ordeal was over.

"But, fortunately for dear Phemy," she ran on, and her voice sounded to Mrs. Blackstone like a bee humming in her ear, "fortunately for dear Phemy, Sir Felix has no relations but a brother. I am delighted to hear we are to meet him here to-day. I looked in the Baronetage and saw he was five years younger than Sir Felix, but it did not say if he were in the army or the navy; perhaps he is a barrister?"

Mrs. Blackstone thought not. She believed he was merely a country gentleman. Mrs. Washington was down upon her directly. "Oh! really? then I suppose he has a place of his own; in what county, I wonder?"

Now Mrs. Blackstone, in her own heart, had always had more than a suspicion that Mr. Bohun lived entirely at Bohun Court, and once or twice it had occurred to her that she ought very delicately to insinuate to Sir Felix that if that were the case, Euphemia ought to be officially in-

formed of the fact, and consulted as to whether such an arrangement met her approbation; but, somehow or other, she had never had courage to attack him on the subject, and, besides, there was always a sort of hauteur about Sir Felix, in spite of his courteous manners, which, to confess the plain truth, kept her at a distance.

But this sort of delicacy and timidity would not have been understood or appreciated by Mrs. Washington. She was one of those maternal martyrs who would sacrifice themselves and everybody else upon the altars dedicated to their daughters, and had she not, before their marriages, arranged everything for the comfort and happiness of their future homes without regard to the wishes or feelings of her sons-in-law, she would have considered herself most culpable. She feared, as she often said, neither man nor beast; but whether she used the latter term in reference to any of her sons-in-law, it was impossible to say.

No wonder that Mrs. Blackstone dreaded lest her warm friend should, even at the eleventh hour, discover this suspected flaw in the brilliant alliance, and impart it in accents of pity to her ten thousand friends; so she turned off the conversation by saying she had lost sight of Phemy, and that Phemy had made her promise faithfully not to do so, as she wished her to be present at her introduction to Mr. Bohun.

Mr. Bohun was becoming rapidly magnified into a person of immense consequence.

So Mrs. Blackstone hurried after her daughter, and Mrs. Washington looked about for hers. Phemy and Sir Felix were standing arm in arm in the gallery, looking over at all the flowering water plants floating on the pure surface of the basins. Fanny Washington had just joined them.

"Phemy, dear," she whispered, as Mrs. Blackstone engaged Sir Felix in conversation on the other side, "I want to know if your innamorato is at all disposed to be jealous?"

"I hope he is," returned Phemy, with a coquettish smile, "but as yet I have never had an opportunity of trying him. Why do you ask?"

"Because there has been a gentleman down there—the oddest-looking man you ever saw, with an odd-shaped hat drawn over his eyes, and his hand over his mouth—he has

been standing leaning against that statue for about half-an-hour, watching all your movements."

"I do not see him," said Phemy.

"Follow the direction of my eyes—there—he is moving—he sees us looking at him—he is coming under this gallery to have a better view of you. Oh? Phemy, he is evidently very much struck. Is he not a curious figure?"

"Wait till he comes quite under," laughed Phemy, in a whisper, "and then we will have some fun with him." Phemy held in her hand a bunch of moss rosebuds, and from these she selected a blighted one, dried up into a hard ball. As he passes beneath," said she, "I will drop this down upon him."

Sir Felix had no great admiration of Miss Washington. He thought she was a frivolous, foolish companion for his peerless Euphemia, and when he heard this whispering, joking conversation going on, he lent an attentive ear to it, and answered all Mrs. Blackstone's remarks at random; but, when he saw the bouquet being taken to pieces, he could refrain no longer, and exclaimed, "You are surely not going to do such a thing?"

He referred to the destruction of the bouquet; he had not heard the previous conversation; but Euphemia thought he meant not going to throw the rosebud over, so she betrayed herself unnecessarily.

"Dear Sir Felix—only our joke—you ought to be quite flattered; there is a gentleman down there, coming towards us now, who has never taken his eyes off me for the last half hour, and we thought that just as he came under this gallery, we would drop this dead rosebud on his hat, and such a hat as it is!"

Sir Felix looked—started—seized Euphemia's hand, and, drawing it through his arm, exclaimed, as he moved quickly away, "How thankful I am you did no such thing! Euphemia, it is my brother!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE wedding was over. The carriages were driving up to The Laurels in rapid succession, and Lady Bohun sat in a chair of state in the drawing-room, looking somewhat pale, nervous, and bewildered as most brides do, but still receiving the congratulations of the numerous friends who crowded round her, with a pleased, happy expression—just, perhaps, a little touch of pride in her manner—a little assumption of dignity, as if she already felt she had risen a step in the scale of society, and yet could hardly realise it.

One after the other came her friends—some matrons, cheering up the young daughter on leaving her home—some girls, admiring her costly rings, and examining the rich lace about her—others neither girls nor matrons, telling her she was a lucky girl, and that it was not everybody who could catch a rich baronet without encumbrances.

“And as for his brother, dear Phemy, what a delightful creature! we have all lost our hearts. There is something about Sir Felix that always rather awes one; Mr. Bohun is charming! Such a kind good face—very like Sir Felix too—but easier to get on with. Ah, you are a lucky girl!”

As yet, Phemy felt very strange with Mr. Bohun. She had not exchanged ten words with him, nor many more looks, so his praises did not call forth any echo, but she felt he was continually watching her. Sir Felix stood amongst a knot of gentlemen, keeping a sly eye on the gravel sweep in hopes of seeing the four greys bring round his new chariot; but Mr. Bohun was hovering near, waiting till he could take advantage of some gap in the circle round her, but this she did not know. She thought he was merely watching, and she chafed under it.

At last there was a vacant space, and he stepped in, bent over the orange blossoms, and spoke to her.

“At last I have found an opportunity of wishing my new sister every joy and happiness.” Phemy bowed and smiled. “It is late in the day to do so, but that has not

been for want of the will, but the way; you have had quite a bevy round you."

"Yes—so many friends."

Phemy did not know what else to say. To everybody else she had had answers and lively repartees ready, but there was something about Mr. Bohun that made her silent against her will, for in her heart she was longing to talk to him. She felt that she neither liked nor admired him as all the rest of the room did, but she would not have had any one suspect it for the world. She would not allow any soul to suspect that there was the faintest cloud in the horizon of her happiness, or the slightest tarnish on the brilliancy of her triumph.

This was Lady Bohun's peculiar kind of pride—peculiar to herself, and yet common enough amongst worldlings.

Was there ever a large circle of acquaintance, amongst whom, when a brilliant match was announced, some were not found who studiously set to work to pick a hole in the fortunes, or the families, of the bridegroom or the bride? Do not people talk on the occasion somewhat as follows?

"Have you heard that Caroline A. is going to be very well married?"

"Yes—that is to say if you call it very well, when I don't suppose they can muster twelve hundred a year between them; and as for *him*, poor man, though he is an honourable, he is perfectly deaf in one ear."

Or else,

"That handsome Sir Henry B. is actually going to be married at last. Miss C. is a lucky girl—her parents are delighted, and he has seven thousand a year if he has a shilling."

"I dare say he has; but don't you remember an odd story, about him some years ago? All the world knew it then, though perhaps it may be hushed up now, and he did not get out of it very well either."

So much for the bridegrooms, and the brides fare but little better.

"Good gracious! Mr. D. going to marry Lotty Eversfield. Is the day fixed? then I hope she will not change her mind before it arrives! a good match for her? Yes—

any match is good for such a finished coquette, and I am sure her mother must be thankful to have her settled."

Or else,

"Colonel E.'s daughter is engaged to Mr. F., who owns that lovely place down in Yorkshire. Nothing can be more suitable than the match; he has wealth and a princely estate, and she has youth and beauty."

"Youth? oh, my dear friend, I remember her before she could run alone. She must be eight-and-twenty, if she is a day."

"Pardon me—her own mother told me she was of age last birthday."

"My dear, in the first place, own mothers are the last people to be believed, when a daughter's age is in question, and in the next, I know she is eight-and-twenty for a fact. Have you ever seen her?"

"No, but I know him well."

"She is no beauty. She has certainly a very fine complexion, and if you could give yourself the trouble, you might have the same; that's all *I* have to say."

And so on in every case without an exception. The world does not allow of the existence of such a thing as an unexceptionable match on both sides. There never was a marriage yet that *somebody* did not try to depreciate, and, to return to our subject, this the new-made Lady Bohun well knew. It was therefore her particular pride to be able to say, "There is no skeleton in *my* house!"

Mr. Bohun returned to the charge. "I think my brother told me you had never been abroad?"

"Never—that is, only to Dieppe."

"You will be delighted with Paris."

"So I believe. I hear the shops are lovely."

"But with the buildings."

"Ah, I don't care for buildings. I am told the shops are so tempting, that I shall hope to pick up a great many pretty things."

"Then," said Mr. Bohun, smiling, "I expect you will transform Bohun Court quite into a temple of the graces."

Euphemia turned her eyes quickly on him.

"Is it a very old-fashioned place?" said she.

"Not very modern—you will see 1615 carved in the stonework over the entrance; but do you know we are very

proud of that date? we don't despise Bohun Court because of its antiquity."

This was said laughingly, but the "we" sounded unpleasantly on Lady Bohun's ears. She felt she did not like it, though she tried to conceal the feeling, and carry it off, so that he should not perceive it, so she answered—

"Of course not, but I meant about the furniture; I suppose all that is rather—rather—ancient, is it not?"

"It was, but a complete renovation is going on. I hope, by your return, everything will be to your taste and in apple-pie order. I only know it shall not be my fault if it is not."

"When are you going down?" asked Euphemia, her heart beginning to beat quicker.

"To-night," said Mr. Bohun, innocently.

Now was the moment.

"Do you always live at Bohun Court?"

It was out at last, and Mr. Bohun seemed struck with something in her voice as she asked the question. He looked at her—she was very pale, but that she was before; had he not looked at her he would have answered readily "yes," but now—he modified the reply: "Hitherto I have done so," said he, and there was a dead pause.

Fortunately it was but of a moment's duration, for Sir Felix had espied the grays coming round, and he crossed the room to where his brother stood.

"You must let Euphemia go," said he, "for the carriage will soon be here. The horses have arrived."

And Euphemia was carried off by her mamma and the bridesmaids.

"Are you pleased?" whispered Sir Felix.

"She is beautiful," replied Mr. Bohun.

"But you, my dear fellow, you must be bored to death."

"Not at all. I assure you I have been vastly amused. I sat by an old lady at breakfast who paid me immense attention. She questioned me most narrowly as to my birth, parentage, and education—almost as to my prospects."

"Mrs. Washington! that imperial pumpkin, as I always call her. The most indefatigable of match-makers and manœuverers. Ah, Guy, I shall be glad to withdraw Euphemia from this set—she is worth better things."

"Any parting commands for me?"

"No, no, I think not. I will write if anything occurs to me. Leave all the tables and chairs at Bohun as they are. Perhaps we may be tempted with some furniture in Paris, and if so, it will only be money thrown away to make additions at present."

Up-stairs the bride was attiring for her journey, tremulous, and very silent. The tearful mother, seated sobbing by her side, and unable even to look at the adornment of her darling, attributed this nervous taciturnity to the young girl's efforts at self-command, but, could any eye have peeped into the recesses of that heart, they would have read a different story—a story that told of the blot on the brightness of her fate, and her sudden consciousness of the fact. She had just awoke to the conviction that, unless she took great care, there would be a skeleton in her house after all!

But she was Lady Bohun at all events—she felt Lady Bohun every inch—more especially when Ponsford glided up to her with a pair of jewel-cases in her hand, and said, as if she had said it all her life, "Which of these bracelets will your ladyship be pleased to wear on the journey?"

Down-stairs, all the guests were crowding into the balcony, or out upon the staircase, to take the last look of the bride. Lower still in the hall, all the servants were ranged to catch her eye, and bid her their farewell. Who does not know all this regular routine of a gay wedding?

It was a grand day for The Laurels, even though Mrs. Blackstone had concealed herself behind the back drawing-room door, and was crying her heart out. It was a grand day, although the elderly couple were left childless, and all that they had lived for was carried off from them by Sir Felix Bohun. It was a grand day for Mr. and Mrs. Blackstone, thought all their guests. They did not see the big tears twinkled away out of the old man's eyes, as he handed his daughter into her new carriage, nor did they guess what it cost him to gulp down the choking in his throat as he re-entered the drawing-room, rubbing his hands and smiling convulsively, and, suspecting his wife's hiding-place, trying to draw the crowd away from it, and entice them to the window to see the four grays flying

along the dusty road over the common till they turned the corner and disappeared behind the trees.

Nobody saw all this ; nobody felt it ; for the departure of the bride and bridegroom is a moment of great excitement, and, after that, comes the excitement of trying who can get away first.

But Mrs. Washington clung to her friend—invaded her retreat behind the door, having espied a corner of the gray *moiré-antique* coming through the crevice—pounced on her like a spider on a fly, and, with all the pertinacity of the most inconvenient friendship, invited herself to dinner to talk it all over.

And the bridesmaids stood in a cluster at one of the open windows, making remarks on Mr. Bohun, who, wandering about with a talkative gentleman of whose name he had not the slightest idea, was learning a great many lessons about ornamental gardening down on the lawn beneath, and waiting impatiently for the moment when he could politely take his leave, and say that he had only just time to save the train.

"I like him," said one ; "he is not so pompous as Sir Felix."

"I look on him as a dethroned monarch," said Fanny Washington ; "mamma found out that he has no home but Bohun Court. Phemy won't stand that, I suspect. Mamma says she found out, too, that he has always completely managed the estate and the household."

"Pleasant for Phemy," exclaimed another ; "Phemy, who made slaves of even those dear old Blackstones, her own parents !"

"Phemy will make a slave of him, too," said a fourth.

"He does not look as if he would be a slave," chimed in a fifth ; "in spite of all that suavity, there is a very firm cut about his mouth and chin. Now, Sir Felix is too polished for my taste—too much of a courtier, or a gentleman of the old school. Mr. Bohun is so blunt and straightforward ; Phemy will never bend *him* to be her slave."

"Then," said Fanny Washington, "she will make his residence in the house disagreeable to him, and so it will come to the same thing in the end."

"Unless Sir Felix brings down that temper of hers be-

fore she fairly mounts the throne of Bohun Court," retorted another.

"Which he is not likely to do," was Fanny Washington's rejoinder; and then the group of her bosom friends dispersed.

Yes, they were her bosom friends, but never mind, she could not hear them. She was Phemy Bohun now, on the pinnacle of her prosperity, and on the high road to Dover; so, of course, her dear friends had a perfect right to say what they pleased of her—behind her back.

If we could all hear what our dear friends say of us behind our backs, how many friends should we go through the world with, and have left to us at the last?

CHAPTER VII.

ON the estate of Bohun, about a mile from the house, was a pretty little cottage ornée, occupied by an old lady, long a dependant on the Bohun family. In her youth she had been governess to the mother of the present Sir Felix, who, in her old age, had installed her comfortably in this cottage, rent free.

A passing visit to old Mrs. Trant was one of the almost daily duties of Mr. Bohun's life. It was a habit both he and Sir Felix had got into, from its having been a habit of the late Lady Bohun's, whose garden-chair nearly every day conveyed her to the old lady with the first of the fruits, the flowers, and the vegetables. Mrs. Trant used to say, that the death of this Lady Bohun had been the greatest blow she had ever received! to use her own expression, "it had shaken her on the pedestal of her life."

No wonder, then, that when she heard that Sir Felix was going to try his chance in the great lottery a third time, her anxiety was great as to how far the new successor would come up in perfection to the amiable being who had preceded her.

Perhaps she was anxious on her own account as well as

on that of Sir Felix. Almost entirely a prisoner to her cottage from feeble health, it was a matter of no small importance to her as to how far the coming bride would replace the friend she had lost—friend and companion both, had the last Lady Bohun been—and, in addition to this feeling, there was her affection for Sir Felix, an affection of nearly half a century's growth.

Anxiously, then, she waited, the day after the announcement appeared in the *Times*, seated in her sunny little bay window, for the swing of her garden gate, and the firm, heavy tread of Mr. Bohun's foot on the gravel path behind the ever-green hedge which skirted her lawn.

True to his promise he came, the tread, perhaps not quite so brisk, or the manner not quite so gay as usual; but still there he was, faithful to his habit, and once seated in the sunny little corner opposite to her, he soon seemed restored to himself again, and ready to answer all her queries and satisfy her pardonable curiosity.

Naturally enough, there was but one subject of conversation between them, and that, the wedding; not the wedding in its small worldly details, but the wedding as by far the most important event in the life of one dear to them both—the wedding in all its bearings, as touching the future happiness or misery of the declining years of a man's life! for neither attempted to conceal from the other that it was late in life for another new tie to be formed, after two had been destroyed.

"Is she a person suited to Sir Felix?" was Mrs. Trant's anxious inquiry; "does she appear likely to make him happy?"

"She is very young—very gay—very pretty," said Mr. Bohun, evading the direct question; "she looks younger still by my brother's side, but as to her more intrinsic qualifications, I only saw her surrounded by friends."

"Is she pleasing?"

Mr. Bohun hesitated. "A bride," said he, "is generally seen to disadvantage, running, for the first time, the gauntlet of her husband's relations. I had only a few moments' conversation with her, but you know how difficult Sir Felix is to please, so let us give her credit for great powers that way."

All this was but negative approbation, and Mrs. Trant

saw it, though she forbore to remark upon it, and Mr. Bohun continued—

"I do not know if you remember that I have a peculiar theory of my own on the subject of smiles. I think they are more characteristic than frowns—more expressive than words—and Miss Euphemia Blackstone's smile did not hit my fancy; otherwise, she has her full share of beauty, as you will see."

"Do they propose coming down soon? Is she not anxious to see Bohun Court?"

"As if Bohun Court were the 'little bit of heaven dropped on earth' which the poets sing so daintily," laughed Mr. Bohun. "No, they are bound for Italy, and talk of remaining away till September or October."

"She will lose the Bohun woods when the leaves are changing, then," said the old lady, in a tone of commiseration.

"She may not appreciate all these things as we do," returned Mr. Bohun; "remember, she is a town-bred young lady, and never having been abroad, may be too much fascinated by the gaieties she will enter into in France and Italy, to wish to settle down in our quiet corner immediately."

Mrs. Trant did not augur favourably of the bride from what she gleaned in this conversation. She had an idea that she was a common-place person.

But, "no," said Mr. Bohun, "my brother would never have tolerated, much less selected, a common-place person. There is a great deal of character about the lady of his choice, but being very young and unformed in manners, I am not prepared to say whether this kind of character tends to good or evil. I should say that she was impressionable, and that Sir Felix may mould her to anything, since she appeared ready enough to give up to him in several little matters connected with their future plans."

"That is a good beginning," remarked the old lady; "trifles show characters sometimes more than great actions. But talking of plans, I take a deep interest in other plans besides those of Sir Felix and his bride. Tell me of yourself, my dear Mr. Guy."

"Myself?" Mr. Bohun did not seem quite to understand. "How do you mean, dear old friend?"

"I mean, does this event change your arrangements at all? Do you still contemplate residing at Bohun Court?"

Mr. Bohun hesitated for some time before he answered.

"Do you know," said he, at last, "that this is a subject to which I know I ought to have given some attention, and I have not done so. Before the marriage, my brother and I had a fierce argument on this very point, and I gave way to his earnest wish that I should remain here to continue to manage affairs as I have always done. Ladies don't take kindly to farm matters, and land cannot well be governed by female heads; so that really, in assenting to his wish that no change should be made, I believed I was acting for his happiness and advantage (if my modesty may permit of my saying so). But now, dear old friend and counsellor, that you have kindly and wisely put it into my head that I ought to have plans as well as *they*, why, I think with you, and I humbly crave your advice."

"Dear Mr. Guy, I am not qualified to advise; all depends so entirely on the kind of partner Sir Felix has selected. It was this that made me so minute in my inquiries, for we cannot afford to lose you, and yet——"

"And yet what?"

"It is not often that the residence of a third person with new-married people answers."

"You are quite right. It never occurred to me, but you are perfectly right, and I ought to have given the subject more consideration. As it is, I see nothing for it but just to wait and see how things go on. After my promise to Sir Felix, I could not well upset all the arrangements at this early stage of the new administration. You do not think I could, do you?"

"No," said Mrs. Trant, "but I know your nature. You have hitherto been singularly fortunate."

"You think I shall have difficulties to contend with?"

"It is possible—I hope not probable—but the ground is as yet untried; and, as I said before, these arrangements seldom do answer—every day you see instances of it."

"True," said Mr. Bohun, "and perhaps I have been unwise. I see it, now that it is too late. But then again—the estate!"

In Mr. Bohun's estimation, every consideration was as nothing compared to Bohun Court. His own happiness

was bound up in it—his own comfort, a trifle in the balance.

He leant back in his chair in a reverie of mingled feelings. Could it be possible, thought he, that the entrance of a mere girl into the family could create a revolution which would, in the most remote degree, affect plans which had been in undisturbed operation for years? Was it possible for one so young, so apparently frivolous, spoilt, half-educated—for Mr. Bohun's penetration had made all these discoveries during two short days spent in her presence—one so unfit to rule—was it possible that *for her* he was to upset the government of Bohun Court, by withdrawing himself from a share in it, and thereby put Sir Felix into a position both of discomfort and perplexity?

What did Sir Felix know of business?—nothing. What was he but a highly-polished, travelled, accomplished man of the world?—nothing! And a smile, proud, almost triumphant, curled Mr. Bohun's firm lip.

"No!" he exclaimed, forgetting that Mrs. Trant could not have been following his train of thought, though she could guess it by sympathy; "there can be no change of plans until a more rightful heir stands in my shoes. No woman can displace the male heirs of Bohun Court."

"It is not entailed," said Mrs. Trant, gently.

"Very true," returned Mr. Bohun, hastily; "and I am glad that you remind me, for it ought to be, for fear of accidents; and it *shall be*, at the very first opportunity, even though, by urging it on my brother, I cut my own throat!"

He walked home to Bohun Court hurriedly. He was perturbed. For years and years his unruffled spirit had never been so stirred up as now, and he threaded the woods with a rapid step, seemingly longing to catch sight of his home, even as if a spirit were at his heels making a greedy clutch at the prize, the possession of which depended on the issue of the race between them.

The sun, like a red ball of fire, was just dipping behind the belt of dark woods, which formed a background to the scene, as he crossed the lawn. The grim old mansion looked gray and cold outside, but when he entered, the changes that had taken place consequent on the marriage

of Sir Felix, seemed to strike Mr. Bohun for the first time.

Inside, it was now a mansion of modern days, gay and costly as all the first upholsterers in London could make it. There was the boudoir, glittering in blue satin and white and gold furniture; the drawing-rooms radiant in cherry satin, and velvet carpets with white grounds; the dining-room a perfect triumph of art, for it had been a gloomy room, and was now a gay one.

But everything was gay—everything fit for the bride whom it was destined to welcome and to please. But outside—

"Ah!" thought Mr. Bohun, as he retraced his steps, and took a turn on the terraces, gazing round him with a sort of irritable ecstasy, "no renovating hand can venture to renovate here! *You* want no improving hand, beautiful old house! I only hope she may admire, appreciate, and love you as you deserve. Inside you seem very new and strange; but outside—outside you are still primitive and peerless, and, thank goodness, unchangeable!"

So when Mr. Bohun re-entered the hall, with its many-coloured new coir matting, and smelt the paint and the putty, and the varnish and the oilcloth, he hurried—not to say rushed—into his own precincts, looking straight before him; nor did his own easy expression return to his face until, opening a side-door, he found himself in the only room in the house in which not a chair, nor a table, nor a carpet, curtain, shelf, nor book had been touched.

But he did not hug himself in morose solitude. On the rug lay his friend and inseparable companion, Hector, a gigantic bloodhound, who, on his master's entrance, rose like a lion from his lair, and welcomed his return by placing his fore paws with dignified gravity on his shoulders, and with an attention intended to be complimentary, licking the face which he thus brought to a level with his own.

CHAPTER VIII.

SIR FELIX and Lady Bohun had been six weeks in Paris. In that six weeks they managed to spend two thousand pounds, what with one thing and another, and then Sir Felix began to think it was time to return home. But the bride thought the contrary. She was delighted with her life abroad, charmed with the shops, and bewildered with the power thus suddenly placed in her hands, of buying whatever she fancied, whether of furniture, dress, or *bijouterie*.

In vain, when piece after piece of tasty furniture struck her fancy and was ordered home, in vain Sir Felix represented to her that it would not suit Bohun Court, it was not the style of the house.

"Then it must be the style of my rooms," was all the answer she gave him; and he soon found it was better to be silent and submit, than to argue, for independently of doing no good, he saw an evil would arise from the opposition to her wishes, on which he had never calculated—she would take a dislike to Bohun Court—and this was too serious a matter to be lightly treated or braved.

"If these lovely things will look out of place in Bohun Court," she had one day exclaimed, "what a horrid old place it must be!"

And Sir Felix shivered to think any one lived, bold enough to bestow such an epithet on his home.

Mr. and Mrs. Blackstone, though rich people, had been, from long habit, strict economists; and though Phemy was their only child, they had always thought it right to allowance her, and to insist on her keeping within that allowance. At the age of two-and-twenty she still received no more than her sixty pounds a year, and upon this, with occasional presents from her parents, she managed to make a very good show.

No wonder, then, that when she suddenly found Sir Felix expected her to spend the whole of that sum quarterly, she launched out into something very like extravagance, and sent home four new bonnets the first week of her arrival.

Even Ponsford ventured gently to expostulate.

"Don't you think, my lady, I had better have the bonnets you brought from home, done up here a little? otherwise, your ladyship will not like them after these Paris ones."

"Oh, no, Ponsford—throw them away—or stay, perhaps they will do for Bohun Court; yes—keep them for Bohun Court."

"Ladies dress a good deal about that neighbourhood in the shooting season, my lady. You will be glad of your Paris bonnets then."

"Well, pack them all up then. I can take a turn of each. How many have I?"

"Seven, my lady."

Lady Bohun reflected a moment. She was not quite sure whether Ponsford did not expect her to say, "you may have my old ones;" but she could not make up her mind to do that, so she repeated, "Pack them all up." Euphemia possessed, to use the language of a phrenologist, a bump of acquisition; and she was fond of accumulating things. For so young a girl, her love of hoarding was singular, and more singular still about her were the contradictions in her character. At the very moment that she was spending hundreds on furniture and dresses, her gloves were mended up to the very tips of her fingers, and at last attracted the attention of Sir Felix.

"My dear Euphemia, whilst you are shopping," he remarked, "let me recommend you to buy some gloves. Yours do not seem to me of the very best."

"Oh," said she carelessly, "my gloves will do very well. Nobody sees one's gloves, and if they did, there is not one hole," and she spread out her fingers in evidence.

Sir Felix was rather shocked. He was so particular about his gloves himself that he always had them made for him, and Euphemia's, mended and worn at the tip of every finger, made a great impression on him. He thought it must be Ponsford's fault.

"No, indeed," exclaimed his bride; "Ponsford has nothing to do with my gloves. I always mend my own. I like to do it, and mamma always made me. I have dozens of pairs upstairs, and if I trusted them to Ponsford she would give me a new pair every day. No thank you, Sir Felix, I am too good an economist for that."

And then crept into the mind of Sir Felix the recollection of the expenditure of two thousand pounds in six weeks—certainly not spent on gloves—but still spent. Yet she said she was a good economist! Well, perhaps, though she spent in some things, she saved in others, so he tried to feel satisfied; though, whenever those taper fingers slid within his arm, he turned his eyes instinctively away, he was so afraid of encountering the whitened tips of the lilac gloves, and the darkened knuckles which she so emphatically affirmed was entirely the fault of his own coat!

"But we really had better be thinking of going home, my dear Euphemia," said he again, one day, "this unsettled life is very uncomfortable, and I am so anxious to show you Bohun Court."

"There will be plenty of time for that," she replied, in the gay, rather flippant manner which was not now quite so attractive to Sir Felix as it had once been; "Paris is so delightful. It is rather early in the year to go and bury oneself."

"I hope you will not look upon Bohun Court in that light, Euphemia. I should like you to be fond of your home."

"Oh, I dare say I shall; only I want to enjoy myself a little first. Do not fancy I shall not be fond of my home; I was always very fond of The Laurels."

Sir Felix pinched in his lips and said nothing. He could not quite reconcile himself to hearing Bohun Court and The Laurels named in the same breath. They certainly stood on the same earth, but that was all.

"Why are you in such a hurry to go back?" asked Lady Bohun, after having waited to see if he would make any reply.

"I am so anxious for your opinion——" began Sir Felix.

"Oh, yes, I know that," she interrupted; "but you know we *must* go some day, so I shall be sure to see it in time, only I want to know why you are in such a hurry?"

"I do not call it a hurry, my dear Euphemia. Our absence was intended to be about six weeks. It is now going on for three months."

"And such happy months! I don't know when I ever enjoyed myself so much."

This was very flattering and almost unanswerable. Still, in Sir Felix's pocket there happened to be a letter—so he returned courageously to the attack.

"I am delighted to hear it, but we may vary the scene of our happiness, I trust, Euphemia."

"Ah, Sir Felix! no shops like these at your dearly-beloved Bohun Court, *I'm* sure."

Sir Felix bit his lips. "No shops, but the beauties of nature, my dear Euphemia."

And now it was Lady Bohun's turn to bite *her* lips. She put her head on one side and began playing with her rings.

"You had some letters to-day, Sir Felix?"

"Yes—that is, not letters, but a letter," said the matter-of-fact bridegroom.

"You never show me your letters. I thought married people always saw each other's letters?"

"My dearest——" Sir Felix instantly began turning out his pockets; "all my letters are open to you—here are half-a-dozen—can you really wish to read through such a mass of uninteresting correspondence? I wish you would always do so, and take it off my hands—here they are."

Lady Bohun was disappointed. "Oh, dear, no," she exclaimed; "I don't care for general correspondence, only you were such a time over that letter this morning."

"That was from my brother, from Guy. It is very long, but if you would like to wade through it—and such a hand as he writes——"

Lady Bohun fancied these were excuses made to prevent her seeing Mr. Bohun's letter, so she was all the more determined to have it.

"I don't mind the length," she said, "if it is all about Bohun Court, which I suppose it is?"

"Yes, and all about the farms and the stock, which I fear you may find tedious," answered Sir Felix, searching for it.

"No, I do not think I shall. I want to know the old place well, before even I see it," said his young wife, and with these little flatteries Sir Felix was always so instantly overcome, that in another moment the letter was in her hand, and whilst he sat quietly down to his newspaper, her

ladyship devoured the contents of the first epistle she had ever seen from Mr. Bohun.

Not but what she knew his handwriting well. Every day had she seen it, and every day had she determined she would summon courage to assert her right over her husband's epistolary correspondence, but till to-day the opportunity had not so easily occurred. She was a little disappointed to find that there had been no difficulty made about it. This very much deteriorated the value of the letter, but still having opened the door, she did not mean to allow it to close again, so with exemplary patience she plodded on, till she came to "your ever affectionate brother, Guy Bohun."

It was all stupid enough, but fortunately there was a postscript.

"I hope you are not going to be an absentee much longer. People are already wondering at your long stay abroad, and I have made all the excuses that I can possibly invent, so, in pity to me and the neighbours, come back."

Yes—it was fortunate there was that postscript, otherwise Lady Bohun's quick blood would have had no chance of boiling up. That postscript contained exactly all she expected. It was the secret influence which had been at work all day, and had sufficed to set her wishes on one side. Sir Felix was going to obey those few lines instead of her wishes, and she clenched the thin paper in her hand with a suspicious smile upon her lips. It was quite enough that Mr. Bohun should command everything at Bohun Court, but his power should extend no further. What right had he to hope anything about the movements of Sir Felix and herself? What business had the neighbours to make remarks? What possible claim had they on her pity, that she should relinquish one hour of enjoyment for their sakes?

Not she, indeed. Before she read that letter, she had been beginning to think she had had enough of what Ponsford called "foreign parts," but now she had altered her mind. No Bohun Court for some time to come, and if Mr. Bohun and the neighbours liked to wonder or complain, why—let them.

"If Sir Felix insists on going back for the next six weeks, Ponsford," said her ladyship that evening, "I must have an attack of illness—can you manage that?"

Ponsford laughed in her gentle, respectful way.

"Oh yes, my lady, quite well."

"What shall we say or do? because you know I shall not like to shut myself up."

"Oh no, my lady. Your ladyship need not be strong enough to travel, and yet quite well enough to go about as usual."

"But I never was ill or delicate in my life, and I always have such a colour."

"I can alter the style of your hair, my lady, and if your ladyship will wear blue for a little while——"

"But I look such a fright in blue."

"Only pale, my lady, which is what will be necessary——"

"So it will! that will do famously. But suppose Sir Felix should go and leave me? Mr. Bohun may urge him so strongly——"

Lady Bohun stopped short. She knew Mr. Bohun's influence, but did not like to own it, even to herself, much less to Ponsford, who, however, was as well aware of it as if Sir Felix himself had confessed it to her.

But Ponsford had great tact. She never by word, look, or sign, betrayed the knowledge she possessed; she seemed to have the faculty of finding out everybody's weak point without their being the least aware of it; and certainly before she had lived one month with Lady Bohun, she had completely fathomed the depths of her character, and unravell'd the thread of all her intricate motives.

At the idea of Sir Felix going home without his bride, even at the most urgent request of his brother, Ponsford almost laughed.

"Oh! my lady, Mr. Bohun may be able to do a good deal with Sir Felix, but not so much as that. Of course, if your ladyship thinks the early autumn at Bohun Court would be unhealthy—and sometimes the fall of the leaf is very bad for people—why then, it would be very unwise to risk it."

Oh! wise Ponsford. This happy suggestion was a

much brighter idea than the fit of illness, because it entailed no self-sacrifice; so the next time Sir Felix began upon his everlasting theme, Euphemia was ready.

"Dear Sir Felix, is Bohun Court a very woody place?"

"Oh yes, magnificently wooded," he answered enthusiastically, "so much so, that I have often thought of thinning the timber a little, only my brother always objected."

Lady Bohun longed to say she wondered what business he had to object, only as such an observation at that moment might not have been politic, she refrained, and kept to her subject.

"Do the trees come very close up to the house, Sir Felix?"

"Yes, my dear. The Bohun woods, which are quite famous in the county, come as near to the back of the house as I am now sitting to you."

Euphemia was at that moment in one window of their apartment, and Sir Felix in the other.

"Good gracious!" she exclaimed; "but how damp that must make it."

"I never heard so," said Sir Felix; "what put that idea into your head?"

"Why, common sense itself must tell one so," retorted her ladyship, with more warmth than politeness; "I remember when the leaves were falling round The Laurels, mamma always took me away."

"And why?" asked Sir Felix, innocently.

"Because it was unwholesome to remain; and besides, she thought it dangerous for me. You know I am an only child, Sir Felix. I have been used to great care."

"And that you shall always continue to have, I am sure," was her husband's reply; "but I doubt if the leaves have begun to fall yet round Bohun Court."

"But they will begin very soon. I wish you would wait another month or so, Sir Felix."

"Oh, my dear Euphemia!"

"If you do not, you will take me there just in the middle of all the damp, and you will see I shall be ill."

"I hope and trust not. The majority of the trees round our house are nice dry firs. Oh, my dear Euphemia, when I think of the delicious scent of those pine woods on a

warm day, when the sun has been drawing out their rich fragrance, I quite grieve that you have missed the summer season there!"

"Never mind. Plenty of summers to come, I hope; but defend me from the autumn. I can stand a winter, Sir Felix, but my mamma always used to say my chest would never bear an autumn amongst foliage."

Poor Sir Felix was sorely puzzled, and sadly vexed. In vain he brought up every argument in his power, but the lady was obdurate; that is, she said she would go, if he wished it, with pleasure. Oh yes, if he insisted, she would certainly go, but if she took cold and went into a decline, he must not mind; if it killed her, she could not help it. And after that, what could he say? what could he do? Why, submit, of course; and so the autumn sped on, and all the glorious tints of the Bohun woods faded into a dull brown, and the old house stood out gray, cold, bare, and cheerless-looking, grimly waiting to welcome, as solemnly as possible, the tardy footsteps of Sir Felix and Lady Bohun.

And still they lingered, not abroad, but absent, sometimes at one gay place, and sometimes at another.

CHAPTER IX.

AND now, behold, at last they come.

The world lay under a canopy of snow. Snow covered the lawn, except where little paths had been swept out. Snow hung on the bushes, the hedges, the plants, and the buildings. It fringed the firs, and weighed down the laurels. It gave Bohun Court a white background instead of a black, and the gray stones of the house with every projection marked out in snow, looked like a drawing on a slate.

It was in such weather as this, on a bitter, damp, gusty evening, that Sir Felix and Lady Bohun drove into the court-yard, and the great bell rang, a sound which was

immediately followed by the barking of many dogs, amongst which, louder than all, was heard the deep bay of a bloodhound.

"Goodness!" exclaimed Lady Bohun, in the moment that elapsed before the carriage steps were let down, "there is a horrid dog howling. How unlucky!"

"Not howling," said Sir Felix, jumping out; "it is only old Hector, my brother's bloodhound, and his voice is reckoned his great beauty."

Now, if I were an orthodox novelist, I should describe how the servants, drawn up in two lines in the hall, headed on one side by the housekeeper, and on the other by the butler, welcomed their new mistress as their old master led her through the admiring throng. But it was not so.

The butler had certainly been waiting some time in the hall, because the train happened to be late, but he and the footman were the only servants to be seen at first, and Euphemia had walked half across the hall by herself, before she was met by Mr. Bohun, and then it was merely the usual greetings, and a hope expressed that she was hungry, and not tired, and a question as to how soon they would like dinner.

All very matter-of-fact, and very simple and homely, and Euphemia at once found herself standing by the fire in the drawing-room as if she had just returned from a drive, except that her eyes wandered restlessly round the room with curious interest, and she felt a restraint in the presence of Mr. Bohun which she could not conceal.

Then in came Sir Felix, rubbing his hands.

"What a night! How d'ye do, Guy? Rejoiced to be at home again, I assure you, but never intend to come by that train again. Stopped at every station on the line, and half an hour behind time at the last. Well, my dear Euphemia, welcome home; this is the drawing-room; rather large for comfort, but still it was as well you should be received here."

"There is a fire in the octagon for after dinner," observed Mr. Bohun, who had by this time wheeled a chair to the fire, and given Euphemia a screen and a footstool, "and my sister has now only to say how soon she would like to have it served."

Euphemia felt very strange, and very silent. She allowed

Sir Felix to answer for her. Even at this first hour in her new home—her very own home—she felt annoyed to see Mr. Bohun so completely take the lead, so completely at his ease as master of the house, whilst she, and her husband, too, for the matter of that, were welcomed as though they were visitors!

But her better nature taught her that these were rebellious thoughts which must be kept down; so, though enveloping herself in a mantle of proud reserve, she forbore uttering a word. She rose from her seat, when Sir Felix said the sooner they had dinner the better, and expressed a wish for Ponsford.

"My maid," she added, as Mr. Bohun looked inquiringly at her.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, "no doubt she is in your room. Let me have the pleasure of being *cicerone* this first evening. I shall enjoy showing you through the labyrinths of passages, if I may—or would you prefer ——?"

He paused, uncertain, from her manner, whether she wished it or not.

He was so open and straightforward himself, that any reserve on the part of those with whom he was associated puzzled him, and he attributed hers to shyness. Perhaps she would rather Sir Felix showed her about? Yes, that must be it, for her answer was,

"Oh! thank you, Mr. Bohun, don't trouble yourself, Sir Felix will show me the way. I need not dress to-night, only I suppose some one has taken Ponsford to my room."

"Where have I heard that name?" thought Mr. Bohun to himself, as he stood on the hearth-rug and watched his graceful sister swim out of the room; "it seems as familiar to me as if I had known it all my life. Where can I have heard it?"

Meanwhile, Sir Felix drew Euphemia's arm through his, and led her up the immense well-staircase which, branching off at the top, led to rooms each way by two galleries.

"This gallery to the right leads to all *our* rooms," said Sir Felix, "and that to the left to the visitors'. This is your room, my dear Euphemia," he added, coming upon a blaze of light, a bright fire and wax-candles showing everything off to advantage, "and my dressing-room is exactly opposite."

"And Mr. Bohun's?" asked Euphemia, on the impulse of the moment.

"That door at the end. Ah! my good Mrs. Dance, I am glad to see you again! My dear Euphemia ——"

There stood Ponsford by the dressing-table, all the glittering toilet appendages already laid out, herself as calm and collected as though she had been there for months instead of minutes, and by her side a little trim old woman, curtsying, nervously.

Euphemia had heard a great deal of Mrs. Dance. Sir Felix was never weary of talking of his old servants; but, for a wonder, his bride felt no jealousy of the little old housekeeper, but received her welcome as graciously as possible, although, the moment the door had closed on her, she sank into a chair and exclaimed,

"Oh! thank goodness, Ponsford, some of the ordeal is over at all events! Shall I have to shake hands with the antediluvian old butler, too? And pray tell me, is this the room the former Lady Bohun slept in and died in? because if it is, no power on earth shall make *me* sleep in it?"

"The last Lady Bohun was a great invalid, my lady, and she never slept on this floor to my knowledge. Her ladyship's apartments were all on the ground-floor, for I have often seen Mr. Bohun wheel her from one room to the other."

"Where was Sir Felix?" asked Euphemia.

"I don't know, my lady," was Ponsford's quiet answer; and Lady Bohun, whilst a few alterations were being made in her dress, fell into deep thought.

When Ponsford had finished her arrangements, Euphemia, still almost in a reverie, opened her door to find her way down to the drawing-room. The gallery was dark oak, with a strip of red carpet running down the middle, and though lighted at intervals by tall bronzed branches on columns, each holding five candles, it still looked very sombre—very different to the gay landings of The Laurels!

But waiting in the gallery was Sir Felix, ready again to draw her arm within his own, and take her down to the dining-room, which he did with a sort of proud, pleased alacrity. She was just on the point of making some cheerful remark on his gallantry, when Mr. Bohun suddenly

emerged from his side door in the hall, and she froze within herself and was silent.

Then Sir Felix led her to her own seat at the head of what was now her own table, and, as he did so, in words inaudible to any ear but hers, he whispered,

"Welcome home!"

Perhaps, had there not been a third person present, some word of thanks, some look of gratitude, some smile of gratified affection would have repaid him, but, as it was—no—she could not speak before that third person—she felt the blood rush into her face, and she caught her husband's pleased smile, for he knew by this time that she was not a demonstrative character, and that a blush from her was worth a volume of words from any one else, but she could not speak.

Fortunately, however, Sir Felix was satisfied, or perhaps he might have been too much occupied the next moment in seeing that all the table appointments were as they should be; be that as it might, he instantly began an animated conversation, and Euphemia sipped her soup and looked round.

Her first impression of everything was, "How very handsome." Her next, "But very old-fashioned."

Yes, it might be old-fashioned; but still, could even she find a fault in it?

Immediately before her, was a silver soup-tureen, perfectly plain, but of a form so peculiar, that it was a curiosity in itself; two quaint, oval, silver side-dishes, also of a fashion of very many days gone by; silver salt-cellars, a curious silver basket in the middle of the table, full of oranges, between every one of which was stuck a little sprig of laurestinus; and at each corner of the table a large silver candlestick. To complete all, the plates were silver, too; and to Euphemia's eyes, this was a very grand display, after the white-and-gold china which was the every-day service at The Laurels.

So she sat and looked at it all, and was pleased, for it was all hers. She wondered whether it was spread out for her especial welcome that day? Yet hardly—for everything was so quietly done—just as if it were the same every day of their lives. And then her thoughts wandered to The Laurels, and her suburban neighbours, and she thought

how much she should like Mrs. Washington to see her at the head of such a table as this.

She had plenty of time during that first dinner in her new home to indulge her thoughts; for Sir Felix and Mr. Bohun talked to each other incessantly. In vain the latter tried to draw his sister-in-law into conversation; no sooner had she replied, than Sir Felix broke in with some question or observation of his own, generally something connected with Bohun Court or its neighbourhood, or else something about his horses or dogs, and then Euphemia's chance of joining in was at an end.

She was not much flattered by this. She had not the justice to watch and see which of the brothers led the conversation into these uninteresting channels, but immediately laid all the blame upon Mr. Bohun: so, to punish him, no sooner was the dessert put on the table, than, afraid of venting her displeasure in words, she leant back in her chair, and made no attempt to conceal a wide yawn.

Sir Felix, in the middle of a sentence, looked at her, and abruptly ceased speaking. Mr. Bohun, on the contrary, immediately exclaimed,

"I am sure you are very tired, and all these details must be very wearisome to you."

"I *am* tired," was her reply; "but not by your conversation; for, to tell you the truth, I have not been listening since you began upon dogs and horses."

"Then we had better adjourn," said Sir Felix, rising hastily; "and I must apologize for having been oblivious to everything except the fact that Guy and I have not met for six months. Let me show you now to the round drawing-room as we call it—it makes a warm little room for the winter evenings."

And he led the way with an alacrity which told Mr. Bohun a tale. It whispered that he did not quite know what the fair lady might say next, and so the sooner he cut short his remarks the better, since evidently something had put her out.

"But she is tired," thought her brother-in-law, "and tired people are apt to be cross. I shall see her to more advantage in the morning, so to-night all that she says and does shall go for nothing."

And it was well that he made up his mind this should be the case, for certainly, during the whole of the tedious two hours after dinner, the young Lady Bohun dropped anything but pearls and diamonds from her lips, but seemed determined to keep her husband in a perpetual state of doubt and disquietude, not unmingled with dread, till he lighted her candle to retire for the night.

CHAPTER X.

THE next morning Mr. Bohun certainly saw his sister-in-law to advantage in one respect, for as he sat at breakfast he could not help thinking to himself she was the prettiest woman he had ever beheld. All he wished was, that she would always laugh, and never smile. The laugh showed a row of dazzling teeth—what the French would call a *superbe rangée*—but the smile was the most unpleasant that could be imagined. It was a sort of grin, a smile that might mean anything, according to the humour in which she happened to be. Mr. Bohun's eyes instinctively turned from it whenever they met it.

Then her dress. He knew a well-dressed woman when he saw one, and she had recollected what Ponsford had said on the subject, and was attired to perfection. She saw he had observed it, and she was pleased, for Sir Felix was one who never observed ladies' dress at all, and she had often remarked to Ponsford that it was no use dressing for Sir Felix. If she wore black, white, or grey, it was all the same to him. His eyes never wandered from her face. Mr. Bohun's, on the contrary, rested flatteringly on her dress.

"My dear Euphemia," began Sir Felix, as soon as he sat down to breakfast, "Guy tells me that I have three hours' work before me in my study, what with reading up correspondences and giving audiences; so that I fear I must reluctantly depute him to have the pleasure of showing you

about this morning, but in the afternoon I shall be at your service."

Lady Bohun turned her eyes towards the window. The sun shone brightly on a dazzling expanse of snow.

"I don't call this a morning for any Christian to go out, if you mean me to walk," was her answer.

"My dear, the choice of the morning's entertainment rests with yourself," continued her husband; "and as for the means of seeing the grounds, let me recommend a pony. Guy, is little Surrey in the stable still?"

Before Mr. Bohun could reply, Lady Bohun exclaimed,

"Oh! don't ask on my account. I would as soon ride a donkey as a pony; and far rather walk, if I must go out."

"No must in the case, my dear; I only thought you would like to see the gardens and the grounds."

"Such a day for seeing anything, dear Sir Felix."

"Fine and seasonable, my dear Euphemia."

"I don't like seasonable weather. In Summer, it means intensely hot; in Autumn, so damp that you catch your death; in Spring, sharp and showery; and in Winter, bitter like to-day."

Mr. Bohun laughed. "You are right," said he, "it is too true. But as my brother's time is so taken up this morning, would you let me show you all the old family pictures in the gallery?"

"Good gracious!" thought Euphemia to herself, "these men think of nothing but their house and its possessions! —Oh, thank you!" she said aloud, "but as the sun happens to shine, and I see people sweeping the paths, I should not mind taking a walk for once in a way; but I tell you honestly, Mr. Bohun, I cannot bear muddy lanes and dripping shrubberies, and all that sort of thing. On a cold day at The Laurels, I used only to walk up and down the conservatory."

"Not much exercise, my dear," said Sir Felix, smiling innocently.

"Indeed!" she retorted, somewhat indignantly, "it was twenty feet long."

"Well, you can do the same here, if you like," rejoined her husband, pointing to the end of the room; "that door opens into ours."

Lady Bohun glanced carelessly around.

"Is there a conservatory there?" said she, in an indifferent voice; "I never even saw the glass doors. Is it a pretty good size?"

"Guy," exclaimed Sir Felix, slyly, "how many feet long, eh?"

"Seventy," said his brother quietly, and there was a pause.

Lady Bohun spoke very little more at breakfast; only as she was passing out of the room in answer to a question of Mr. Bohun's,

"Is it to be the seven-leagued boots?" said he, with his bright, kindly smile.

"If you please," was her answer.

"What hour would suit you?"

"About twelve, I suppose, is the best time," and she sailed away without further remark.

It had been a very stiff, silent breakfast table. For the first time in his life, Mr. Bohun had felt himself a third person. There was something in Lady Bohun's manner even on this, the very onset of their acquaintance, which induced this feeling. It was not fancy on his part. He felt it for a fact, and could only hope that when she knew him better she would like him more, and as a natural consequence, make him feel this position less.

And full of this spirit of conciliation he lighted his cigar, and walked off to the conservatory to benefit the plants, and to await the lady's pleasure.

The arrival of the new Lady Bohun at Bohun Court had made a great sensation in the household; but there was another actor on the same stage whose appearance had created an almost equal stir, and this was Ponsford.

Ponsford, coming to Bohun Court with her quondam mistress as a visitor, had always been a great lady; but coming now as Lady Bohun's own maid, she was a greater lady still, and when old Mrs. Dance awoke on this first morning of her presence in the house, it was with that weight of some undefined misfortune with which one's steeped senses generally awake charged, if anything unusual or startling has occurred the night before.

She and Ponsford were to breakfast together that day, and this was the incubus; yet Ponsford was a person of such suavity that the only wonder was, how any one could

ever be afraid of her. Yet this was certainly old Mrs. Dance's sensation. She was afraid of Ponsford's elegance, Ponsford's calm remarks, and Ponsford's graceful caps. Moreover, Ponsford always spoke of Lady Bohun as "her ladyship," and this struck awe into all the old-fashioned servants' minds, for to them the two Ladies Bohun, under whose gentle sway they had all lived, had never been addressed or spoken of as anything but "my lady."

"Will my lady please to come to my room, Mrs. Ponsford?" asked she, when their *tête-à-tête* was over, "or shall I go up and take her orders for dinner?"

Mrs. Ponsford said she would go and inquire, and in half an hour she returned.

"Her ladyship begs me to tell you, Mrs. Dance, that she will not trouble you to come up: and as her ladyship is going out walking with Mr. Bohun she intends resting in her room until then; but about the dinner, provided you see that there is fish, and something of chicken, and something of sweetbread—these are her ladyship's own words—she does not the least care what she has."

Mrs. Dance was silent from perplexity. At last she said—

"My lady no doubt means she would wish me to draw up a bill of fare."

"Not at all, Mrs. Dance, I assure you. To tell you a little secret, her ladyship cannot bear anything like trouble, and she is not the least particular about her dinner; indeed, I always ordered it for her when we were abroad. I am certain she will be quite satisfied with your selection, provided, of course you recollect that her ladyship makes a point of fish, and chicken, and sweetbreads."

Poor Mrs. Dance was still sorely puzzled. This was not at all what she had expected, nor anything like what she had ever been accustomed to. The ordering of dinner had always been quite an important ceremony at Bohun Court in the lifetime of the former Ladies Bohun, and even after their death Mrs. Dance had been in the habit of attiring herself especially for this ceremony in an appropriate costume, and waiting on Mr. Bohun in the library to take his orders. Had she lived to take orders, and such indefinite orders, too, from a lady's maid?

No. But the old woman was meek and very gentle, so,

instead of exploding, she thought she would merely try again.

"Chickens, of course, my lady can have whenever she pleases, but I fear, Mrs. Ponsford, unless the coach is ordered to leave fish regularly at the gate, we shall have some difficulty just at first. Mr. Bohun had fish just when the man in the village happened to have any over; but it is so out of the way here, that we have to write a general order when our dinners begin, and Mr. Bohun said I was to ask my lady when I applied to him."

"Of course," said Ponsford, slightly rearing her head in a manner peculiar to herself; "of course her ladyship orders everything now; but fish she must have, that I know. It must be arranged somehow."

"I will send directly," said Mrs. Dance, "but perhaps my lady will allow me to see her, to take her commands for the future."

"I dare not disturb her ladyship, *you* may, if you like to venture," returned the lady's-maid.

"I mean about the sweetbreads," persisted Mrs. Dance, quite distressed; "there can be none to-day, I much fear, for they only kill veal once a week, Mrs. Ponsford, and the day is past. We shall always have to bespeak whilst the neighbourhood is so full."

"You do not intend to say that her ladyship actually cannot have sweetbreads when she pleases?" exclaimed Ponsford.

"They only kill once a week," persisted the housekeeper.

"Then, my good Mrs. Dance," retorted her companion impressively, preparing to swim out of the room with equal grace and dignity, "they must kill a calf on purpose, that's all I have to remark."

Whereupon she left Mrs. Dance to her perplexity and distress, and rejoined her mistress, who was unpacking her Parisian *bijouterie*, and brushing it with a tiny jeweller's brush dipped in eau de Cologne.

"Have you got me out of it, Ponsford?"

"Yes, my lady. I said you could not possibly be disturbed."

"What will she do to-morrow, do you think? Plague me again with her clean apron and curtsies?"

"Oh, no, my lady. I can arrange it again to-morrow

till she becomes accustomed to my ordering dinner, and then your ladyship will have no further trouble."

But Ponsford, clever and useful as she was, did not quite understand Mrs. Dance. The old lady was not going to be silenced without a remonstrance. She did not intend, meek as she was, to resign her prerogative without a struggle, so straightway she sought Mr. Bohun (not Sir Felix—Sir Felix was nobody in comparison), and found him smoking in the conservatory.

It took her very few minutes to detail her grievance, and to her infinite relief and consolation, Mr. Bohun entered into it immediately.

"It was my fault, Mrs. Dance; nobody's fault but mine. Sir Felix, you know, never thinks of these things, so all the arrangements ought to have been cut and dried by me, and placed before Lady Bohun in proper form. She would then have known that it was the custom of the house for you to wait on her every morning for her commands. Dear old Dance, don't fret. It shall all be right to-morrow."

"But, sir, I fear not. If it were only my lady I had to deal with, I might hope; but it is that fine maid. Then about the fish——"

"There again my fault! How could I have been so stupid as never to tell Horsman to begin sending it again every day? All my selfishness, not caring for fish myself, and also, perhaps, their arrival having been so often fixed and then put off again, and then so unexpected at the last. However, never mind Goody Dance."

"Ah, sir, but my lady may mind very much."

"Not she. She is young, and gay, and pretty, and may care for silks and satins, but not so very much for good dinners."

"My lady's maid, sir, made such a point of the sweet-breads, that I think my lady *does* mind what she has; but as for them, why, that's an impossibility, sir."

"Then of course you said so?"

"Yes, sir, I did."

"And what did this grand lady's-maid say?"

"Why, sir, she said, as composed and cool as I am now, and more, 'then,' says she, 'you must kill a calf on purpose.'"

Mr. Bohun could now preserve his gravity no longer, but at this climax burst into a fit of uncontrollable laughter.

"The best thing I ever heard in my life!" he exclaimed; "I should like to see the individual who made the remark. But now take my advice, Mrs. Dance. Wait till I have seen and spoken to Lady Bohun. I am going to walk with her this morning, and I dare say I shall have an opportunity of setting things right. If not, Sir Felix will. Any way, do not let a new maid put out our dear old Dance; so trot along, and send up as good a dinner to-day as you did yesterday, and all will be well in the end."

So he thought. But he had not until now come into contact with any one resembling the new Lady Bohun. He was "reckoning without his host," as the saying is.

In a few minutes more she joined him in the conservatory, and as she made her way cautiously between the plants, ejaculations fell from her lips at every step.

"Ugh! ach!" and sundry others. "One can see that it is some time since you entertained a lady at Bohun Court, Mr. Bohun. If I have a horror of anything, it is smoke—cigars, I mean; I never suffer Sir Felix to smoke. If you will allow me, I will put off my inspection of the conservatory until it is purified a little. I did not know you were smoking."

Mr. Bohun hastily threw away the offender, with many apologies. "He had no idea she would have been ready so soon," he said. "He did not know that his brother had given up this vice—he fancied Lady Bohun would by this time have been quite inured to it. But, since you dislike it, I shall make a point of abstaining for the future," he added, and Euphemia bent her head in token of acceptance of the apology.

They then started on their walk, and as he followed in the wake of a black moiré antique of fabulous dimensions, Mr. Bohun had time to examine and make mental comments on his new sister. He regarded her rather as a curiosity, and certainly her dress, for that country walk in the depth of winter, was young female England to perfection.

She had on, as I before said, a dress of black moiré

antique. It was looped up all round over a red petticoat of quilted silk. A tight black cloth jacket profusely braided, a wide-awake with a red feather, and turn-down collars with a red ribbon under them, completed the upper part of her attire. But it was on her feet that the eyes of Mr. Bohun rested in profound surprise. She had boots, the heels of which reminded him of nothing so forcibly as the favourite chaussure of Mother Shipton—high pointed heels,—laced with red.

"I should like," thought he to himself, as he gazed, "to show her to Mrs. Trant." And then he thought better of it. "No, not in this guise. The impression would be startling and ineffaceable. I could not present, in a costume like this, the new Lady Bohun."

So she had actually at last become Lady Bohun in his sight? Yes—he who had thought he never could look at her except as Miss Blackstone, now saw in her a Lady Bohun so completely standing alone in her own fashion, that she sent the memory of her predecessors back into the abyss of the past, and was too utterly unlike either to provoke even the faintest comparison.

CHAPTER XI.

MR. BOHUN had come out to escort his sister over the grounds, to show her the gardens, and conduct her through the leafless shrubberies. Did she permit him to do so? Not she. The paths had all been swept a certain width, over which her draperies extended on both sides at least a foot; thus, to attempt to walk by her side was impossible. So he had to follow her, and as she walked very fast, never asked him the way, but pursued whichever path she pleased, talking incessantly to him in a voice which rang loud and clear in the frosty air, and never once turning her head to see where he was, he felt very much as if the tables were turned, and *he* was the one to be shown the way.

On, and on, and on they went; in and out of the small

iron gates, up and down the acclivities and declivities, the lady still taking the lead, till at last she stopped from sheer want of breath.

"Well, Mr. Bohun," she panted, "I hope you are satisfied now. I am sure I have walked far and fast enough to please anybody, but I tell you honestly I am not going to be taken much further. Are there no benches, or arbours, or any resting-places anywhere?" And her eyes glanced restlessly round.

She looked very beautiful, eyes sparkling, and cheeks glowing, otherwise he longed to say something severe upon the dance she had led him, but unfortunately a pretty woman may go a long way with an impunity denied to an ugly one, so he rather coldly replied that she had wandered some distance from the grounds; they were now on the confines of the Bohun woods.

"Oh, Mr. Bohun, why in the world then did you come so far? How am I to get back again?"

Still preserving his equanimity, he informed her that the only mode by which she could return was that by which she came. If she pleased to vary the route, he would be happy to show her another way.

"A shorter cut?" she asked.

"No—much about the same distance, only through the woods instead of the open ground."

"And get wet through? no, thank you, Mr. Bohun. Then I will go back the way we came, though perhaps I may drop with fatigue by the way. However, that will not be *my* fault," and the emphasis was not flattering.

Mr. Bohun then bethought him of Mrs. Trant's cottage. It stood just midway between where they now paused, and Bohun Court, and though Lady Bohun was neither in a humour nor a costume to render her a desirable companion to introduce just at that moment, still it was better than permitting her to over-fatigue herself, and be blamed for it by Sir Felix; for though his brother had hardly been at home four-and-twenty hours, Mr. Bohun had discovered that the lady possessed considerably the upper hand, and had begun to try and mould him to her every will and whim. So, very hesitatingly, he suggested that there was a cottage at no great distance, where, if she liked, she might rest.

"Mamma never let me go into cottages. She was so afraid of infectious disorders," was Lady Bohun's answer.

"Oh, but there are no children in the cottage I mean. It belongs to an old lady—a dear old retainer, if I may so call her—one of whom you may probably have heard from my brother—Mrs. Trant."

"Do you mean the old governess?" asked Lady Bohun.

The question was abrupt, and it jarred on Mr. Bohun's nerves. It was the second time that day that she had given him a similar twinge, and he could not help feeling that there was a want of good taste both in the tone with which she had uttered the words, "the old governess?" as well as in the sentence with which she had greeted him in the conservatory, namely, "one can see that it is some time since you entertained a lady at Bohun Court!"

These words had struck him as wanting in good feeling, and the former in good taste. Mr. Bohun was gifted with no small amount of penetration. He was beginning to see that his fair sister was something more than a spoilt child, but he answered calmly.

"Yes, the same. She was my mother's governess, and remains one of our most attached friends; but Lady Bohun," (He had such a dislike to the name of Euphemia, that he felt he could never use it, and so began at once to call her Lady Bohun,) "she is very old, and not very strong—I am not quite sure but what I ought to prepare her for your visit, if you are kind enough to call on her——"

"But is there anywhere else to rest?"

"No, not for two miles."

"Then call I must, whether I like it or not, for rest I must have. Now, Mr. Bohun, lead the way, if you please, and don't take me twenty miles round."

So off they started again, the lady silent because through the woods there were no paths swept, and she was obliged to be careful, and the gentleman silent, devising how he could possibly dissuade her from paying this visit.

When quite at his wits' end, she suddenly rescued him from despair.

"Mr. Bohun, I feel that if I once sit down in a chair you will never get me up again. I had better not call on

your old lady to-day, so just walk on, and if it is the proper thing for me to pay the visit, I can come with Sir Felix another day."

And with this they rapidly pursued the winding paths till they came out at the back of Bohun Court, and found themselves in the ivy-grown quadrangle round which were ranged the dog-kennels.

No sooner did Mr. Bohun appear, than every tenant started out of his retirement, with a yell of joy, and Lady Bohun held her hands up to her ears in pretended agony. Amidst the many-toned voices, rose the deep bay of Mr. Bohun's bloodhound.

"Ah! ah!" cried Lady Bohun, "there is *my* enemy! I knew him by his voice. He howled me a welcome last night, and not satisfied with that, kept me awake till this morning."

"You don't mean that?" said Mr. Bohun, turning quickly towards her.

"Yes, I do. I said to Sir Felix this morning, the first thing, if that dog were mine he should be shot."

And now a deep colour rushed into Mr. Bohun's face. His eyes gave a flash like fire, and biting his lip, he turned on his heel, and left her to find her way into the house alone.

On the stone steps he sat down and gave a low whistle. In an instant a huge animal started from his kennel, came bounding towards him, and, placing his large paws on his master's shoulders, began whining and licking his face all over in an ecstasy of joy, whilst his bright intelligent eyes sparkled with genuine happiness.

It was the hour that Hector and his master always went into luncheon together; for seven years this had been their invariable custom, and never, till this day, had Mr. Bohun hesitated about it. To-day, however, two or three words from careless lips, made him pause and think, whilst the dog, seemingly surprised at the delay, all but asked, "Why don't we go?"

But she had called him her enemy, and said, if it had been *her* dog — No, Mr. Bohun could not repeat that sentence even to himself. He could not imagine how any one, after seeing the noble creature, could have the

heart not to tolerate the noise he might make, for the sake of his beauty. And could any one call that sonorous voice a howl? Had she not clearly said he howled?

What would she say if they walked in to luncheon side by side?

"We can but try it, at all events," said he to himself, after a few moments' reflection; and rising, they entered the house together.

Luncheon had been waiting some time. Sir Felix, who was the soul of punctuality, had worried himself into a fever. First he thought they must have lost their way, but then that, with his brother for pioneer, could hardly be possible. Then he fancied his Euphemia had walked too far, would sit down on a snowy bank, and catch her death of cold. Lastly, that they had gone in to see old Mrs. Trant, and this was a consolatory supposition.

But when Mr. Bohun and Hector appeared alone, his fears broke forth.

"What *has* become of Euphemia?"

Mr. Bohun, whom nothing scarcely ever agitated, hurried, or discomposed, detailed the proceedings of the morning with brief simplicity, but before he had ceased speaking, the folding-doors, from the intermediate drawing-room, were thrown open, and Lady Bohun appeared. She looked annoyed.

"Not my fault, Sir Felix—if any one is to blame it is not I. Ponsford tells me the whole house is in a state of alarm because luncheon has been on the table about ten minutes; but in the first place I had not the most remote suspicion we were tied to minutes so very strictly in this house; and in the next, if I am late, it is not my fault."

All this was uttered with a rapidity which compelled Sir Felix to wait patiently for an opening, of which he took the earliest advantage.

"My dearest, Ponsford is mistaken——"

"Dear Sir Felix, pardon me, Ponsford is never mistaken. She knows the ways of this house better than I do, I have no doubt."

Mr. Bohun gave one of his quick upward glances, and Sir Felix turned pale, but he proceeded temperately notwithstanding.

"My dearest, I meant that the hours at Bohun Court

are, of course, under your entire control, but as to a state of alarm, it is I only who have suffered——"

"Dear Sir Felix! how can you?"

"My dearest, I really imagined some catastrophe had kept you out all these hours."

"Not my fault, Sir Felix. Ask Mr. Bohun, *he* knows."

Mr. Bohun was breaking up biscuit for his dog, and a curl, half a smile, came to the corner of his lip, as he replied to the appeal by saying, "We certainly did walk much farther than we intended," and he said no more; for just then he was again puzzling himself to think where he had heard that familiar name of Ponsford.

"But since you are here, safe, sound, and blooming," continued Sir Felix, "take something to restore your exhausted energies. My dear Euphemia, chicken or some cutlets?"

Lady Bohun did not immediately answer. She had caught sight of the dog, and her eyes were fixed on it with an expression of mingled haughtiness and displeasure.

"May I ask," she began, addressing her brother-in-law, "if that dog is always your companion at meals?"

"Hitherto he has been so," said Mr. Bohun, caressing the great ears affectionately; "but if he offends in any way——"

"I cannot endure dogs—and that one, begging your pardon, Mr. Bohun, is such a monster."

"He certainly is unusually large," returned Mr. Bohun, taking the word in its least objectionable signification; "but he is as gentle as a lady's lap-dog. However, if you object, Lady Bohun——"

"Oh, never mind to-day. I don't want to create any more confusion *to-day*," she said, with marked emphasis; "only, as I don't like dogs, it is not so very pleasant."

"He shall go," said Mr. Bohun, rising.

"No, no; I beg not. Pray sit still, and let us have our luncheon. Chicken, if you please, Sir Felix—only, as I said before, I hope it will be only for *to-day*."

And the luncheon went on in silence.

CHAPTER XII.

"PONSFORD," said Lady Bohun, as her maid attended at her toilet that night, "I have done two great deeds to-day."

"Have you, my lady?" said Ponsford, smiling.

"Yes; and I assure you it requires no small courage to eradicate the bad habits of a house that has been for so many years under the government of a couple of bachelors, as one may almost say."

"Very true, my lady."

"But, luckily, I am not wanting in that sort of courage, Ponsford."

"No, my lady; and it is very fortunate your ladyship is not. Many a young lady would take things just as they find them, and then no wonder many a house is made so uncomfortable."

"Quite right, Ponsford. But you will never guess how bold I have been; only fortunately I remembered what mamma's friend, Mrs. Washington, used to say; always take the bull by the horns at once; and so, when I found Mr. Bohun smoking in the conservatory—*my* conservatory—I very quickly gave him to understand that that would never do!"

"Dear me, my lady! was Mr. Bohun really guilty of such a thing? and your ladyship in the very house! But I remember people always said the last Lady Bohun quite spoiled him."

"Then I am sure I shall not, and I flatter myself I shall not find him smoking there again in a hurry. Well, that was one great deed, and the next was about that abominable dog of his."

"Oh, my lady! I spoke to Mrs. Dance about that, and said how it had disturbed your ladyship's rest last night, and that really I thought the dog had better be sent down to the kennels."

"Where are the kennels, Ponsford?"

"In the woods, my lady."

"Then there it shall go. But what did Mrs. Dance say?"

"Oh, my lady, she took me up quite sharply, and said I had better speak to Mr. Bohun about it, and see what his answer would be, insinuating that I might as well expect to move Bohun Court as Hector."

"Did she really? Very well; we shall see, then, who has most power here. But at all events, I have put a stop to its being brought into the room at luncheon; that I *would not* permit."

"I should think not, my lady. But it seems to me that Mr. Bohun has lived here so long as master, that perhaps he hardly knows——"

"What he does not know, Ponsford, I shall be very happy to teach," retorted the new Lady Bohun, and with that laudable resolution her eyelids closed in sleep.

So had passed the first day of the new reign; not auspiciously, thought all parties concerned. As for Mr. Bohun, it was an era in his life, and he could not sufficiently express his astonishment at the singularity of this young creature's character. He could not conceal from himself that even this slight beginning augured ill for the future; and when he came to think over the events of the day—a day that had seemed interminable—he recollected his promise to old Mrs. Dance to set all things right before the next morning, in *her* department, and now, what had he done?—nothing! He had not had an opportunity of approaching the subject, and even if he had, he doubted whether his moral courage would have permitted him to enter upon it.

Such had been the effect of that day upon him, and sleep overtook him as he still lay wondering what the next might bring forth, and hoping better things.

But before the arrival of that blissful tranquillity for which he was so sanguine, there was a little affair to be settled between Mrs. Dance and Ponsford, the rival queens.

The next morning, determined not to be extinguished without a struggle, Mrs. Dance prepared as usual to wait upon "my lady" after breakfast, to take her commands as to the various arrangements for the day; but no sooner had she set foot on the stairs leading up to "my lady's" room, than, as she secretly expected, she was met by the lady's-maid.

"Oh! Mrs. Dance, her ladyship thought you would wish

to see her about this time, so I was just coming to save you the stairs. I am sorry to say her ladyship is very much fatigued to-day—quite knocked up from having over-walked herself with Mr. Bohun yesterday."

"I am sorry to hear it, Mrs. Ponsford," replied the old lady, drily. "Will you please to ask my lady if she would be so good as to give me her orders now? or would a later hour suit her ladyship better?"

"I have this moment left her ladyship, Mrs. Dance, and I am authorized to say she does not feel able to exert herself to-day, or rather this morning. I hope she may rally a little after luncheon. Her ladyship cares so little what she has for dinner, that provided you are good enough to see that there is, in addition, of course, to the fish, a *vol-au-vent* of something tender——"

But Mrs. Dance was now upon her guard and upon her dignity. She was nerved up to act with the spirit which she considered necessary, and, without a moment's hesitation, cut short what she looked upon as the cool effrontery of her rival.

"I thank you, Mrs. Ponsford," said she, drawing up her prim little figure and making a stately little curtsy; "I thank you, but pray do not trouble yourself to give me orders;" and, turning round, she straightway descended to the library, where, deep in heaps of accumulated accounts, sat Sir Felix and Mr. Bohun.

"Sir Felix," began the old lady, addressing her words to her master, but her looks to Mr. Bohun, as though from him only did she expect the real support and assistance, "I am truly sorry, Sir Felix, to intrude on you on such a point as a difference in the household, but I have lived here, Sir Felix, fifty-five years, and never did so before, so I beg your pardon humbly. But if you please, Sir Felix, I wish to tell you, and Mr. Bohun, and my lady, as respectfully as possible, that I cannot, unless by your express orders—and even then, Mr. Bohun, I don't really think I can—I cannot take orders in this house from Mrs. Ponsford."

It was out. The fair, but faded and shrivelled cheeks, of the little old woman bore a pink spot of agitation, and her eyes twinkled, not tearfully, but with dry anger—as much anger as such pale blue eyes could show.

Sir Felix leant back in his chair, and put his hands in his pockets. Mr. Bohun looked down, and drew pictures on the blotting paper before him. Neither spoke, and then the old housekeeper proceeded to narrate her grievance, and ask for a remedy. She did not wish to intrude on my lady—she would not trouble her for the world—but she had considered it proper and respectful to see if she would like to take the complete rule of the house and the ordering of the dinners, before she took upon herself to follow the old plan of doing it all on her own responsibility.

"You know, Sir Felix—and Mr. Bohun, you know—that I am capable of conducting this establishment, and am ready and willing to save my lady all the trouble I can; but not knowing what my lady might have been used to at her own home, I thought, perhaps, she might think it an undue liberty if I did not step up every morning, as usual, just to ascertain her wishes, and so I began at once; but each day I have been met by Mrs. Ponsford, and stopped, and had orders given me; and this, sir, begging your pardon, I cannot put up with again, for if you remember, Mr. Bohun, I spoke to you about it yesterday, sir."

Sir Felix looked at his brother, his countenance full of vexation, and then Mr. Bohun felt he must speak.

"So you did, dear old Dance, and I am only sorry that I had no opportunity of saying a word on the subject. I am certain that to wound your feelings would be the very last thing Lady Bohun would wish to do."

"The very last thing," said Sir Felix.

"So that I have no doubt that a few words of explanation will, as I said yesterday, soon set matters right; and if you will let my brother and myself talk it over a little, and come again in half an hour, I think you will not have cause to complain again. What do you say, Felix?"

"Quite so—I agree with you—yes, my good Dance, suppose you let Mr. Bohun talk it over with me, and come again, eh?"

"As you please, Sir Felix," said the old woman, and retired in silence.

The brothers then looked at each other.

"This is very disagreeable, Guy," said Sir Felix.

"Very," returned Mr. Bohun. "It is what most people have happening in their houses every day—a domestic row

on a small scale; and some people enjoy it, but I cannot say I do."

"But what are we to do?"

"Confer with your wife, Felix. There is nothing else to be done. Depend upon it, young and inexperienced as she is, she is not aware that old servants stand a good deal upon punctilio; but if you represent things in their true light, she will see how very little will settle affairs quietly."

Sir Felix mused. "I think it is rather foolish though of Dance," said he; "she might as well have let matters take their course till we are a little settled."

"I don't think that," said Mr. Bohun; "she is an old woman of some experience, and depend upon it, she would not have spoken had she not seen the necessity. It is rather hard for an old servant like herself to be under the orders of a lady's-maid, probably younger and more inexperienced even than —"

"Ponsford is not so very young, Guy, and by no means inexperienced; on the contrary, she is quite a confidential sort of person."

"Really. I have never seen her, but somehow her name seems very familiar. Then I conclude she was an old servant of Mrs. Blackstone's?"

"Oh, no! She only came to us when we married. But now, Guy, do suggest something. How are we to arrange this?"

"Speak to Lady Bohun. Request her to see Mrs. Dance every morning for five minutes, and give her own orders. If she dislikes this, ask her to delegate the power to you."

"Or to you?"

"Oh, no; not to me! I am nobody here, Felix; and I had rather not be brought into the field at all."

"But suppose Euphemia were to wish it?"

"I do not think she will," said Mr. Bohun.

Sir Felix rose with a heavy sigh. He was placed for the first time in his life in, to him, a very difficult and disagreeable position. He was about to undertake a most distasteful errand; and he would not have confessed, even to his brother, how doubtful he felt as to the reception his request would meet. But there was no help for it. He must go,

for anything was better than hot water in the house, and so he rose to depart.

Just as he was moving towards the door, there came two or three little raps at it.

"Come in," said Sir Felix, stopping short.

The door opened and a figure entered. It was Ponsford. She did not appear to see Mr. Bohun. Her eyes were on Sir Felix; but had she looked round the room, she would probably have been rather flattered, than otherwise, to have seen the expression of dismay with which the former gazed on her, or to have heard the words which were absolutely trembling on his lips.

"The vampire, by Jove!"

"If you please, Sir Felix," said that softest of voices, "her ladyship would be very glad to speak to you for a few minutes."

The words were uttered in a gently interrogative tone, but to the ear of Sir Felix they implied a summons which demanded his immediate attention, and, moreover, obtained it; so much so, that as he left the room, Mr. Bohun ejaculated to himself, "I wish him joy."

He was absent more than an hour; Mr. Bohun, meanwhile, feeling very much as that friend feels who has accompanied a victim to the dentist's and awaits, in the ante-room, his return from the room of torture.

And when he did return, those brothers knew each other's faces so well, that Mr. Bohun had but to give one glance to read at once the result of the interview, for "defeat" was plainly written on the brow of Sir Felix.

"I hope," began his brother, pacifically, "that everything is pleasantly arranged."

"I found Euphemia extremely displeased," was Sir Felix's reply.

"And why?" asked Mr. Bohun.

"Of course!" retorted the husband of half a year, "and no wonder. I really am surprised at old Dance; she should have known better. I find she never even waited to hear the end of Ponsford's sentence, but turned short round, and came off to me. She should have waited patiently, and made a proper request to see Euphemia."

"Whose version of the story is this?"

"Euphemia has this moment told me."

"And did Ponsford tell her?"

"Of course."

"Is Ponsford quite and entirely to be relied on?"

"Guy?"

"Yes, I ask; because that very soft-spoken individual is not entirely unknown to me. Do you remember the vampire?"

"Pshaw, Guy! how absurd to rake up that old name. Pray do not utter it before my wife."

"Not I. But you remember her of old, do you not? Do you remember the dread with which all our servants looked forward to a visit from the Tophams, because it entailed Mrs. Ponsford? How well I seem now to know the name! Do you remember the so-called legacy of pearls left to her by Lady Mary, and the tremendous uproar it created in the family? Do you remember a certain story, carefully hushed up, of a pen held in the hand of the dying Lady Merivale?"

"Guy, you put me out of patience!" cried Sir Felix; "why revive these useless stories?"

"To put you on your guard against one who may otherwise bring dissension into our peaceful home. Don't let the vam—I mean, don't let Mrs. Ponsford set you against dear old Dance. And now to business—have you arranged matters?"

"Yes, but with some difficulty. At first Euphemia was very anxious that Ponsford should be a sort of half-and-half housekeeper, just to order dinner, or hardly that, but to say what Euphemia wishes to have and all that; but this I thought inadvisable. Was I right?"

"And then?" said Mr. Bohun, evasively.

"Then I suggested that she should merely go through a form of seeing a bill of fare, or a list of company, and all that sort of thing; but Euphemia says that she cannot bear being tied to that kind of ceremony: very naturally, poor young thing! she has never been used even to *think* for herself, much less to manage a large establishment."

Mr. Bohun wished to remark that it might be as well, then, if she now began to learn, but he refrained, and listened patiently to Sir Felix, as he continued.

"So it ended by my asking her if she would like Mrs.

Dance to take the whole into her own hands for a time, and reign sole housekeeper; and then Euphemia will be able to judge if all is conducted as she wishes, and either to alter, approve, or find fault, as the case may be; and thus you see there will be no more disagreeables, eh, Guy?"

"A compromise," said Mr. Bohun; "yes, a very fair compromise, and I hope it may last."

"What—have you any doubts?"

"It depends."

"On what?"

"On whether the — whether Ponsford interferes or not. If she should, Dance will throw down the sceptre."

"Well, we can but try. Euphemia likes Ponsford; she is very useful to her. I should be very sorry to be the cause of her leaving."

"No fear of that," said Mr. Bohun.

"Ah, Guy! you are very unjust to that poor woman," returned Sir Felix.

"I hope I am," was Mr. Bohun's reply, and there the dialogue ended; but his thoughts ran in the same channel for several hours afterwards, and the feeling uppermost in his mind was,

"I have heard that there is a skeleton in every cupboard. I thought Bohun Court an exception, but I suspect it has got in, even here, at last!"

CHAPTER XIII.

BOHUN COURT was full of company; four or five married couples and a daughter or two staying in the house, and people from the neighbouring country seats coming to dinner every day. It reminded the residents in the county of the old days of the first Lady Bohun, who used to come down for a few months in October with all her London-season dresses, a little crushed and a little faded, and show off to a house full of company till after Christmas.

The third Lady Bohun had now been married some six months or so, and was becoming accustomed to her new position. She was completely in her element. She ruled her husband, for he gave way to her implicitly; she ruled her household through Mrs. Dance, who gave her no trouble at all; and she ruled the fashions round Bohun Court, for she was dressed by Ponsford, and could have stood the scrutiny of a dozen French milliners.

Lady Bohun was in the ascendant; Sir Felix sunned himself humbly in her radiance, and Mr. Bohun calmly fell into the background, with a quiet dignity that won him infinite admiration. He and his sister-in-law rarely clashed; some people said it was because they mutually avoided each other, and others that it was owing to his faultless temper. Yet there were well-meaning friends and admirers of his who, in their mistaken zeal, often drew from Lady Bohun's rosy lips some of those cutting and mischievous remarks for which she had already gained herself quite a name.

There was one young lady, the only daughter of a retired old Admiral near Bohun Court, with whom Lady Bohun had this first winter formed a violent intimacy. Sir Felix had a great dislike to female friends. It was one of his opinions that a married woman should have no bosom friends, seeing that a married woman should have no secrets or confidences except with her husband, and so fully aware of this was Lady Bohun, that she had not as yet ventured to ask him to allow her to invite even her friend Fanny Washington to stay with her.

But the intimacy with Miss Maynard had been dashed into very suddenly. She had arrived one day with the Admiral, her father, to dine and sleep at Bohun Court, and having been snowed up for three days, left the house Euphemia's bosom friend.

Miss Maynard was what the world calls a very fast young lady. She was the first specimen of the kind that Lady Bohun had ever seen, and it amused her exceedingly. Motherless, and brought up entirely under her father's eye, she had received a masculine education, and had no feminine tastes.

"I cannot think how I ever came to have a daughter," the old Admiral used often to shout, at the top of his

voice; I never wanted one. I wanted a son, but I've made her as like a boy as I could," and this he evidently considered a circumstance to boast of, so that Jem, as she was familiarly called (having been christened Jemima), never stood a chance of being polished to the brilliancy of other young ladies.

The morning after the arrival of the Maynards on the occasion of this their first visit, Lady Bohun's eyes opened in dismay on the snow. The house was full of company—how could she amuse them all day?

"Ponsford, the gentlemen are sure to go out; but what on earth am I to do with the ladies?"

"Oh! my lady, you will find Miss Maynard a great assistance. I used to hear Lady Mary say, she was as good as a play, and to hear her and Mr. Bohun go on, was almost enough, with nothing else."

"Why? Does he not like her?"

"I don't know, my lady. Nobody ever knows who Mr. Bohun likes or dislikes——"

"Very true, Ponsford; I never met such a close, reserved man in my life. But do you mean, on the contrary, that there is a flirtation between them?"

"Oh! dear no, my lady. I can hardly explain; but your ladyship will soon see what I mean—nothing like a flirtation—but, somehow, Miss Maynard seemed always after Mr. Bohun, teasing him and trying to annoy him."

"Then, if she succeeded, Ponsford, she must have some wit about her, for I never saw such an imperturbable character as he is, in all my existence. I can only say I never managed to annoy him."

Ponsford said nothing, but there was something peculiar in the expression of her face which caught Lady Bohun's eye.

"Ponsford, you look mysterious. Do you mean to say——"

"Oh! my lady, I never pay attention to what people say—I mean to ill-natured remarks, and all that. I was only thinking just then how very easily, in reality, Mr. Bohun *can* be annoyed."

"Can he? How do you know? About what has he *ever* been annoyed that you know of?"

"His dog, my lady. I am sure I thought I never should hear the last of that: and yet what lady could ever suffer such a monster as that to be made a drawing-room pet?"

"Oh! *that* annoyed him, did it? Serve him right, Ponsford. Besides, mamma's friend, Mrs. Washington, used always to say to all her young married daughters, if there is anything you don't like in your homes, strike at once, never hide a skeleton in your cupboards: so, you see, I spoke out at once. And about the smoking, too; I suppose that annoyed his high-mightiness as well! Did you ever hear anything of that?"

"Never, my lady; but Mr. Bohun smokes all the same, only in his own sitting-room, which is just under my room."

"And you have the benefit of it, then?"

"Oh! my lady, that does not signify," said Ponsford, with a martyr's smile, "I shut my window, that's all."

So Lady Bohun went down to breakfast, secretly satisfied that, at all events, in two instances during her reign, her power had not only been exercised, but *felt*.

Miss Maynard was already in the breakfast-room when Lady Bohun entered. She was seated up upon the corner of the side table, just behind her father, who was reading the newspaper. Mr. Bohun leant against the window opposite to them, opening letters.

"Where's Jem?" roared the Admiral, as Lady Bohun approached.

"Up here, sir."

"Get down, then. Don't you see Lady Bohun?"

"I'm not blind, father dear, and Lady Bohun isn't deaf," said the young lady, and sprang nimbly to the ground.

Lady Bohun shot a rapid glance at Mr. Bohun, met his eyes, and saw them instantly fall again. He seemed to have been watching the effect of this new guest's appearance on her, but as yet her only feeling was extreme surprise; she neither liked her, nor disliked her, but watched her as a curiosity.

The guests gathered, one by one, round the breakfast-table, and Miss Maynard seated herself next to Mr. Bohun.

"I always make a push to be next to you, don't I, Mr. Bohun?"

"Yes, Miss Maynard, you certainly do, and it will not, I trust, make me over-value my humble powers of entertainment."

"I don't think so, since I generally find I have to amuse you. Now, tell me, how have you been getting on since I left you? and where is your shadow?"

"Which question am I to answer first; and who is the shadow?"

"Hector, to be sure."

"Hector, thank you, is quite well."

"And how have you fared under the new *regime*? or, as papa would say, the new flag?"

"I think I sail under very fair colours, Miss Maynard."

"Oh! yes, I know you do in one sense; she is very pretty; but, you know, I don't mean that exactly; I want to know if you get on well together? People say you don't."

Mr. Bohun was accustomed to the *brusquerie* of Miss Maynard, but even he was startled by this emphatic sentence. She perceived it, and immediately added, "You look guilty, so don't puzzle yourself to find evasions. Let us pass on, or rather go back to my opening question about Hector. I am so used to feeding him at every meal in this house, that I wish to hear the rights of it. How has he offended?"

"He has not done so, to my knowledge."

"Then why is he not here?"

"Because he is in his kennel."

"Very well, Mr. Bohun. I see, and I understand. You think yourself very sharp, and very cautious, but your silence betrays more than words can tell. However, my lady is listening to us, though she is smiling so sweetly on Captain Berrington, so let us talk of her instead of Hector. How well she looks by daylight."

"Extremely; it is that exceeding delicacy of complexion——"

"That's a cut at my brown cheeks."

"Pardon me, Miss Maynard. There are as many beautiful brunettes as blondes."

"Try again, Mr. Bohun; but you won't beat that in a hurry."

"I was about to observe that the first time I ever saw

Lady Bohun was by daylight, and she struck me then as she strikes me now——"

"Where did you first see her?"

"At the Crystal Palace."

"If she stood the test of that glare, she can stand anything."

"She looked then as now—a perfectly beautiful young woman."

Miss Maynard gave a sigh.

"Well, do you know, Mr. Bohun, I am very glad."

"At what?"

"That you like her—didn't you say so?"

"You did not ask me, Miss Maynard."

"Bless the man and his evasions! never mind—but I am glad, because I like her myself. I like everything about her except——"

"An exception already?"

"Yes—except her maid. How can you and the vampire exist in the same air? Are you not afraid?"

"Do I look ill, Miss Maynard?"

"No, I don't think it has begun its deadly work yet——"

Mr. Bohun gave a shiver, and at that moment Lady Bohun suddenly addressed him——

"Somebody walking over your grave," said she, with a smile.

"Two horrid prognostications in the course of one second," whispered he to Miss Maynard, laughing.

"Captain Berrington," said Lady Bohun to her neighbour, who was an *habitué* at Bohun Court, "I think I must begin to try a little match-making. Do you think it would do?" and she glanced at her brother-in-law and his tormentor.

"If matrimony ought to begin with a little antipathy, or even a great deal, it would do very well," was his answer.

"Why, they have been whispering together all breakfast time."

"She on the offensive, and he on the defensive, that is all, Lady Bohun. Bohun is not the man to admire that style of girl. What do you think of her?"

"I am amused. She is a character. I never saw any one like her."

"In this neighbourhood they are called 'the Maynards,

père et fils. 'Till you know her a little better, you will hardly appreciate the appropriateness of the phrase, but when you do, you will say she is well named Jem Maynard, for no other name would suit her. You did not know old Lady Merivale, did you, Lady Bohun?' "

"No; but I know she was a regular guest here in old days."

"Yes, and she was a marvellous old woman; but what I was going to observe was, that when people used to say to her they wondered that so gentle, nervous, and delicate a person as the last Lady Bohun could put up with such a visitor as Miss Maynard in the house, Lady Merivale used to fire up in her defence, and say, 'Why not? I am sure she is very gentleman-like!'"

The trivial conversation of that breakfast table sent Mr. Bohun to his den in a fit of profound meditation. He had lived too long in the world not to know that even in the most remote quarters, where the fewest possible number of people are gathered together, those people will talk; but human beings have very much of the ostrich in their nature; they hide their heads in the sand, and flatter themselves they are invisible. Mr. Bohun now saw that he had been hiding his, whilst all his neighbours had been watching and making remarks upon him.

"I want to know if you get on well together—people say you don't."

That was the sentence that rung in his ears, that had startled him when it was uttered, and startled him still more now, when he sat quietly down and dissected it. Even the consolatory fumes of the forbidden cigar could not dissipate the emotion with which he pulled that sentence to pieces, and weighed every word of it.

Did they get on well together? Did his sister-in-law—his brother's wife—and himself get on well together? that meant, did they agree?

They had lived under the same roof for three months—had they ever had a quarrel? a dispute? or an angry word?—never. But, nevertheless, did they get on well together? Mr. Bohun looked in the clear depths of Hector's large, loving brown eyes, upraised and fixed on his face, and seemed to see the silent answer there. It was, No. Did even they agree?—no; not in thought, or word, or action;

they had not a feeling, or a taste in common; no wonder then that they did not "get on" together, much less "get on well."

And the world had found it out. This, to Mr. Bohun, was the worst part of the business. For the honour of the Bohun name he would have hidden the thorn in his heart for ever, had not that same inquisitive world, that efficacious throng called "people," of whom Miss Maynard was the voice, drawn it to light.

And now, what could he do? He wanted somebody to talk to. He would have liked to have gone down to the library and had a long chat with Sir Felix, and to have said to him candidly, "I want a home of my own—I want a *pied-à-terre*—I am no longer of any particular use to you, since stewards and bailiffs can do what I do much better than myself. Let me go." But he well knew that no sooner should he have seated himself to have a *tête-à-tête* with his brother, than by some mysterious agency, Lady Bohun would be informed of the fact, and would descend with a long strip of work in her hand, express a little surprise at finding him there, and seat herself in the deep window with the air of a martyr.

No—he could not go to Sir Felix. Then he bethought him of his old friend the rector—he who, on the first rumour of the impending marriage, had flown to him on the wings of true friendship, to offer what now seemed to Mr. Bohun to have been prophetic condolences. But it was snowing heavily, and it was not worth while running the risk of a wetting, and finding the rector out for the day.

There was but one other person with whom Mr. Bohun was on terms to suit the present moment. That was old Mrs. Trant. No chance of her being out on such a day.

"Suppose we go and see Mrs. Trant, eh, Hector?" said he.

The dog testified perfect acquiescence.

"We don't mind the snow, do we, Hector?"

And the huge animal was instantly on his feet, trembling with eager impatience, and a red light gleaming in his eyes. He knew he was going to be taken out for a run with his master.

"So we'll go, Hector," and drawing on high boots, and rolling himself in a plaid, Mr. Bohun and his dog sallied forth by the window.

CHAPTER XIV.

As he crossed the snow-covered lawn, Lady Bohun and Miss Maynard stood at a window which was at the extreme end of the gallery upstairs. They had been looking at the old family pictures, with a view of organizing some *tableaux vivans*.

"There goes my knight," remarked the young lady; "what business has he to go without me?"

"No hope of *our* stirring out such a day as this," said Lady Bohun, looking up at the leaden sky.

"Where can he have emerged from?" pursued Miss Maynard, "he and Hector?"

"From his 'den,' as he calls it," said Lady Bohun, rather contemptuously, "where they sit together all day, generally."

"But his den used to be up-stairs in my time; where is it now?"

"He has always inhabited the same rooms ever since I have known him," returned the young hostess, "a room at the end of the passage leading out of the great hall."

"Why that was the last Lady Bohun's own boudoir," exclaimed Miss Maynard, "and the nicest room in the house."

Euphemia said nothing; but coloured, and bit her lips.

"I know the room well," continued the fair Jem; "upon my word, Lady Bohun, you were very kind to give it up. Isn't it the very *beau idéal* of a snugger? and such an exquisite room in summer! Just under the window is an immense bed of lilies of the valley, the only place in the whole garden where they can be induced to flourish, and I always fancied the violets under that window were sweeter than anywhere else, not that I care for flowers particularly,

only that room in your predecessor's time was the very Garden of Eden for fruits and flowers. Do let us go down, now that he is out, and rout out the bachelor's den, shall we?"

"Not for the world," said Lady Bohun, "Mr. Bohun smokes, and I assure you it is quite bad enough to pass even the end of the passage. I had a baize door put there before I had been a week in the house."

Miss Maynard laughed. "Poor dear! Did you really throw such cold water on its innocent little bachelor vice? Did he know why you put it up?"

"Of course he did; but what did that signify? He used to smoke in the conservatory, but I soon stopped that. I cannot well prevent his smoking in his own room, but I assure you my maid, whose window is just over that room, is half poisoned, and I am seriously thinking what can be done."

"You and I would never do to live together, then," laughed her companion, "for I go halves in all my old father's cigars. But, now, what can we do to amuse ourselves? How infamous of that man to go out! Never mind; let us find Captain Berrington and some more of the gentlemen, and go and have a game of billiards, shall we?"

"But the ladies?" said Euphemia, "I must try and amuse them."

"Don't. You are not bound to look after them till after luncheon. Leave them with their novels."

Miss Maynard was as good as her word. She found the gentlemen, as many had not ventured out, and played at billiards with them till luncheon. The snow continued to descend heavily, and the carriages that had been ordered to take away a few of the guests were countermanded. Every one looked fearfully at the weather, for there was a fair prospect of being snowed up, and the afternoon closed in, dull and dark, before four o'clock. It was at this crisis that Miss Maynard came out in brilliant colours. In the evening they were to have *tableaux*, but how to spend the time from four till seven?

"Shut up," cried Miss Maynard, "shut the shutters, clear a large table, and let us have a round game."

And sure enough, when Sir Felix entered the drawing-

room just before the first dinner-bell rang, he found almost all his guests in the midst of an uproarious game of lansquenet.

Never before had the sober walls of Bohun Court looked down on such a sight! But as Euphemia seemed as much amused as any of the party, Sir Felix retired to his own precincts again with a satisfied smile on his face, and there he sat till she joined him, dressed for dinner.

She had something to say to him. He always read this in the manner in which she used to enter the library, and it generally made him feel a little nervous. He never knew what might be coming.

The fact was, she had been holding a conversation with Ponsford during the process of adornment, and a visit to Sir Felix was invariably the result of these conversations.

Ever since the morning Lady Bohun had been brooding over what Miss Maynard had told her about Mr. Bohun's having taken possession of the late Lady Bohun's boudoir! but she had no opportunity till the evening of exhaling all the annoyance it had caused her. To Ponsford, however, every grievance was sure to be immediately detailed, because they met with such ready sympathy.

"Ponsford, did you know that that room appropriated by Mr. Bohun down-stairs was always the boudoir in this house?"

"Oh! yes, my lady. It is the prettiest room in the house, and the sunniest, which was the reason the late Lady Bohun always inhabited it."

"Why did you never tell me so, Ponsford?"

Ponsford looked surprised. She thought, of course, her ladyship knew it.

"Indeed, I did not. I always imagined that the small drawing-room—the room I call the boudoir—was Lady Bohun's."

"No, my lady. Her ladyship was very delicate, and required the morning sun. That is the only room in the house that seems always to have the sun, yet never to be too warm, so her ladyship quite lived in it."

"No wonder. I am sure I am perished in the drawing-rooms. I had no idea that there was a more comfortable room than the one that has been fitted up for me. Mr. Bohun seems to have feathered his nest very completely, I must

say! I never thought of there being a pretty room down that dark narrow passage."

"There is a door into the drawing-rooms, my lady, and that used to be open in former times."

"You must be mistaken, Ponsford. There can be no door of communication, or I should surely have seen it."

"Indeed, begging your ladyship's pardon, there is. Lady Bohun used to be wheeled right through all the rooms twice a day, when she became too ill to go out."

"Then that room actually belongs to the suite, then?"

"That it certainly does, my lady."

"Well! that is pretty cool of a bachelor, I think, isn't it? But I think you must be mistaken about the door, Ponsford."

"Well, my lady, it may certainly have been bricked up——"

"Oh! dear no; there are no signs of such a thing."

"Then, my lady, it is behind that large carved ebony cabinet—I know that is where it always was."

Lady Bohun fell into a reverie.

"I must see about this," said she, half-talking to herself, and when Ponsford had put the finishing stroke to her toilette, she descended to the library.

Ostensibly she went there to await the ringing of the second dinner-bell (the custom of Bohun Court being to ring three), but, in reality, to follow her favourite custom of striking whilst the iron was hot. Mr. Bohun must not remain in undisturbed possession of that room if she could help it. The assumption of it amounted to a positive impertinence; but how to begin was rather a difficulty. Fortunately, Sir Felix led to it himself. He thought Euphemia must be fagged to death with her guests; it had been a long day for everybody, but more trying, of course, to the hostess than to her friends, particularly as all these guests were comparative strangers.

"Miss Maynard, that extraordinary girl," said Euphemia, in reply, "has been a great assistance to me—Ponsford said she would be. But I confess I should feel less fatigue if I had some warm little snug room to retreat into. Dear Sir Felix, the cold to-day has been intense. Is it possible you have not felt it?"

"I cannot say I have. I was obliged to ride over to the

horse-fair, and came home very far from cold, I assure you. Guy generally arranges the farm purchases for me, but to-day, as ill-luck would have it, he was out of the way—not to be found anywhere. But, my dear Euphemia, after all the pains I took, I should be extremely vexed if the boudoir I prepared with so much care for you were deficient in luxury or comfort. What is it you wish? You know you have only to give your orders—tell me how it can be made more comfortable?"

"Oh! dear Sir Felix, it is not the furniture, or the luxury, or the comfort, that I care for so much as the situation and aspect of the room. In the first place, it is what I call a passage-room; actually it has three doors—one from the hall, one from the drawing-rooms, one from the dining-room."

"My dearest, that is one of the peculiarities in the construction and arrangement of Bohun Court. You may walk round the entire circle of the hall through all the rooms; every room is what you call a passage room."

"Yes, but every room has not three doors, Sir Felix. Three doors make a boudoir something like an ice-house. Three doors and a fire-place! I wonder sometimes I do not catch my death of cold."

Sir Felix smiled, for, during the whole course of his acquaintance with the fair Euphemia, he had never seen her with anything approaching a cold.

"Ah! you may laugh," said she, testily, "but if you sat there as much as I do, you would not like it. Besides, there is no retirement in that room; guests in the drawing-room can hear every word I say; and as for the sun, I never see it till two or three o'clock, and then in summer I shall be burnt up there."

Sir Felix leant back in his chair, with his hand over his mouth in an attitude of meditation, Euphemia glancing at him out of the corners of her eyes, watching her moment.

"I understand," said she, cautiously, "that that was not originally the boudoir."

"No—no—," hesitated Sir Felix, "certainly it was not; but it occurred to me that this would make you such a pretty room, because of the view. The other has no view."

"What other?"

"Guy's little room; that was the boudoir in old days."

"So I am told," said Euphemia, coldly.

Something in her voice struck Sir Felix, and he looked up hastily, but the words he seemed about to utter died away.

It was Lady Bohun who continued.

"And Mr. Bohun has taken it for his own room, I hear."

"Yes," said Sir Felix, briefly.

"Temporarily, or for a continuance? For as long as he lives here?"

"My dear Euphemia," exclaimed her husband, at last rousing from his placidity, "this house is my brother's home."

"Strong language," thought the young wife, but it did not daunt her. It was a point of too deep annoyance for that.

"I am aware of that," she rejoined; "but is he to appropriate the nicest room in the house to the sacrifice of my comfort?"

"Dearest Euphemia, have you seen it? Have you really carefully surveyed the little apartment you seem to covet? Believe me, it will not bear a shadow of comparison with your own boudoir, and whoever has told you so, has, I fear, had some mischievous motive for such exaggeration. My brother requested me, as a favour, to allow him to have that room—he had a peculiar and touching interest in it. I could no more have found the heart to deny him that request, than I could now have the courage to ask him to resign it."

"Oh, dear!" laughed Lady Bohun, satirically, "if *you* do not possess the courage, Sir Felix, I *do*! I assure you I should ask it as easily as possible, but, mark me, not to be refused! If you give me authority to request him to change rooms with me, the request must be complied with!"

"That depends upon my brother, Euphemia."

"You are not, then, master in your own house, Sir Felix?"

"Not to the cost of Guy's comfort, my dear Euphemia."

"My comfort, then, is of secondary importance to you?"

"My dearest, I have done everything in my power to endeavour to ensure it."

"And the first favour I ask you, you refuse."

"Ask me anything but this, Euphemia. I gave my brother my word that nothing should disturb his tenancy of that room. He is attached to it, and his reasons are sacred to me. My dearest, you possess my whole affection as a living wife, but the dead must at least claim my respect. I cannot eject Guy from his occupation of that boudoir, so do not grieve me by saying you have asked it as a favour."

"But I have, Sir Felix!" cried Euphemia, her eyes flashing fire; "and, moreover, I have been denied. Thank you," she added, rising haughtily, "I thank you for making me nominal mistress of a house with two masters! But remember, Sir Felix, however much consideration and obedience *you* may please to show Mr. Bohun, I owe him none, nor will I pay him any. It is quite bad enough to have an idle bachelor living in one's house——"

"Euphemia, Euphemia!" exclaimed Sir Felix, his voice trembling with agitation, "I beseech you not to utter words which, in a cooler moment, you will feel are both cruel and unjust."

"Not I! If he is to interfere with me and my happiness, I will, at any rate, let him know it!"

"Euphemia, you shock me! The idea of Guy, so good, so amiable, so unoffending——"

"Ah, yes! so perfect and so delightful! No wonder he deserves to be petted! But, my dear Sir Felix, he has not been good, and amiable, and unoffending to *me*! Remember that odious dog the very first day after I arrived."

"He withdrew it the moment you objected."

"Withdrew it from our breakfast and dinner table, certainly; but does it not still go on howling every moonlight night till it drives me nearly wild?"

"If that is the case, Euphemia, I will try for a remedy by asking Guy to send it down to the kennels."

"Asking Guy, indeed! Why not send it, since it annoys me?"

"It shall be seen to," said Sir Felix, wearily.

"Then that disgusting smoking!"

"Oh! my dearest, you have nothing to complain of there! My brother most studiously and scrupulously avoids smoking near any of your rooms."

"He smokes in his own, which is just under Ponsford's, and she is half poisoned. She cannot actually open her window during the hours he indulges in a habit which makes a man totally unfit for ladies' society. This is another reason why I wish his room to be altered. If Ponsford takes my dresses into her room for any alterations, they come back to me fragrant with that intolerable smoke! Is this to be borne?"

"My dear Euphemia," exclaimed Sir Felix, rising hastily, as the third dinner-bell pealed through the house, "everything you have said shall be carefully weighed by me, and remedies found if possible; but I cannot consent to any plan which involves the discomfort of my brother."

"You repeat, then, that you don't mind mine?"

"I never said so at all; but, my dearest Euphemia, prove, by your silence to Guy on these subjects, that you have some confidence in me; trust to my devotion to your happiness, and spare my brother the pang of feeling that he is not now as much at home in this house as he has been for forty years—spare him this, and everything you wish shall be arranged."

"Oh, skeleton in my cupboard!" ejaculated Lady Bohun to herself, as, decking her face in its usual smiles, she preceded her husband to the drawing-room, and prepared, with apparent sweetness and inward bitterness, to go the round of her guests; "skeleton in my cupboard, you shall be a rod in my hand over that weak man, to mould him to my will! Mistress will I be in this house, or my name is not Lady Bohun!"

CHAPTER XV.

AND in this mood she took her place at the head of her brilliant table.

Are there not many, and many, and many of us, who sit at our festive boards, mix smilingly in our gay circles, and go cheerfully about the world, doing our every-day work of pleasure or business, with these self-same skeletons in our hearts? Is there one bosom so full of happiness, or so free from care, that it holds no place in which the grim visitor may not, at some time or other, take his ghastly seat? perhaps not all with equal ghastliness, but still, is he not there, dim and undefined, or else, mighty in silent power?

A bitter, vengeful skeleton haunted Lady Bohun through every room of her house, and a restless, anxious dread was the skeleton that had now begun to prey on the mind of Sir Felix. In another bosom, too, at that table, sat the spectre, gleaming sadly from the thoughtful forehead of Mr. Bohun, and "waiting by his side." Even he had, at last, bowed down before it. It seemed as though, having just effected an entrance into Bohun Court, it was appearing before the different inmates of the old place in various shapes

At all events there was a skeleton in the house, but outwardly, the merry party went on all the same.

People talked, and laughed, and demolished all the good things, and Lady Bohun talked and laughed more than anyone else. She carried it off well; but Mr. Bohun sat far back in his chair and hardly answered the lively sallies of Miss Maynard. As for Sir Felix, he had that day handed to dinner a new lady-resident of the neighbourhood, who rose from table with the impression that she had never sat next to so stupid a person in her life.

And she who had caused this disquietude secretly watched, with scarcely-concealed satisfaction, the working of her spells, although to the ear of the assembled guests she was but planning the *tableaux* for the evening.

There was a buoyant sort of gaiety in the manner of Lady Bohun which was very fascinating to casual acquaint-

ances, and to Sir Felix it was witchery itself. The consequence was, that whilst listening to her, and admiring her, he entirely forgot that it was her hand that had planted the thorn which was festering at his heart, but felt much more inclined to lay the blame elsewhere.

"Yes," thought he to himself, as he answered all his neighbours' questions wrong, "yes, it is hard to bring a young girl from her home to live amongst utter strangers, and not to exert every nerve to make her happy. It is hard for her to make requests, and to have them refused. I feel for her, poor young thing, and I was harsh, almost cruel, not instantly to accede to her wishes. Happily, with the elasticity of her youth and spirits, she seems to have forgotten it; but this very evening, if I can speak to Guy, it shall be all altered."

Did not that young wife know perfectly what was passing in her husband's mind? Yes, as perfectly as if he had spoken for all the room to hear; so she "bided her time" patiently, convinced that, in the end, she would gain her point, though, at present, things looked unpropitious.

Miss Maynard, as usual, sat by Mr. Bohun at dinner, and attacked him on the subject of his absence from home that day.

"And my only morning here, as far as you knew," said she, "for we little expected to be snowed up. However, we have spent a most agreeable day—I have won fifteen shillings at lansquenet, and a box of cigars at billiards from young Montgomery. He offered to play for gloves, but I said cigars were more in my line, and I won them."

"Young Montgomery," as the fair Jem called a gentleman who sat opposite to her, was a tall, pale individual, with a glass in his eye; one of those sort of people who might be any age between twenty and fifty, which, perhaps, was the reason that he always went by the name of "young Montgomery."

"With such attractive amusements," was Mr. Bohun's answer, "I hope you did not miss me as much as might be expected."

"Yes, we did; because we happened to want you. So shabby of you to leave us when there was so much to be arranged. Nobody could find the key of the old cabinet at the end of the gallery, where Ponsford——(you know

—the vampire—) said there were some ancient court dresses —”

“How did she know?” asked Mr. Bohun, very abruptly.

“Because she knows everything; so the cry for Mr. Bohun was universal, was it not, Lady Bohun?”

“I beg your pardon?” said Euphemia, interrogatively, smiling sweetly, pretending not to hear, but having heard every word.

“Did we not want Mr. Bohun at luncheon, about our *tableaux*?”

“But he was at luncheon, was he not?” said Lady Bohun, with a look of feigned surprise.

“Unhappy man, to be so little missed!” laughed Miss Maynard; and there was a sudden silence round the table.

It might have been accident, it might have been intentional, but certainly these “awful pauses” do invariably occur at awkward moments, and so it was in the present case. Lady Bohun kept her eyes fixed on her plate—Sir Felix set his face very stiffly—and over Mr. Bohun’s calm and chiselled countenance there came a flush, but no other sign of annoyance.

Old Mr. Melville, the rector of Bohun, happened to be at table that day, and something in this incident, trivial as it was, seemed to strike him. He glanced uneasily at Mr. Bohun, and this glance caught Mr. Bohun’s eye, bringing back to his memory again Miss Maynard’s expression of the evening before—those careless words, “People say you don’t.”

“Ah,” thought he to himself, “everybody sees it, everybody knows it, even old Melville, poor, good old man!”

But Miss Maynard went on. “I will tell you what our first *tableau* is to be. Queen Elizabeth giving the ring to the Earl of Essex. We wanted you to stand for Essex.”

“Not to your Queen Elizabeth, Miss Maynard.”

“Why not, Mr. Bohun?”

“Because I am so often offending you that the ring would be coming back every day.”

“Well, as it happens, Lady Bohun is the Queen, and she may be a more forgiving person than I am; however, it is all settled now, with young Montgomery as Essex, so you are out of it, but you had no business to be out of the way when we wanted you, had he, Lady Bohun?”

"I think we have done pretty well," said the hostess, in a very gentle voice; "at least, I hope everybody will say so."

"Yes," persisted Miss Maynard, "only no one knows all the nooks and crannies of this dear old house as Mr. Bohun does, and, by the bye, we still want some armour."

"Sir Felix," said Lady Bohun, again, very gently, but distinctly and pointedly, "we shall want you, after dinner, to show us some suitable armour for our second *tableau*—Edward receiving the keys of Calais."

Whilst Sir Felix was replying, Miss Maynard lowered her voice to a whisper.

"Mr. Bohun, I want to scold you. You and I are old friends, and I take liberties accordingly. Do you know that you are behaving very badly? Why don't you conciliate that sweet creature more?"

"What sweet creature, Miss Maynard? Young Montgomery?"

"Pshaw! nonsense! you know who I mean; and what I mean, too. I think her charming."

"I am delighted to hear it, Miss Maynard."

"Then why are you so cold? so distant? so reserved? with your 'Lady Bohun,' and her 'Mr. Bohun,' and your cat and dog looks at each other? why don't you call her Euphemia (though it certainly is the most frightful name that ever parent inflicted on a child), and then she would call you Guy."

"I have almost forgotten that such is my name, Miss Maynard. When we grow old, we drop our names, and take to our titles."

"Stuff! If I were Duchess of Diamond-eyes, no soul would ever dream of calling me anything but Jem, unless yourself. But you have grown so stiff; you are a perfect ogre. I don't know you now, Mr. Bohun, and let me tell you privately as a friend, that it is not wise of you—not politic—she is an important personage, and you are a bear—now don't fire up, but give me some of those brandy cherries."

Oh, careless words! careless words! do the speakers of careless words ever think them over again afterwards, and repeat them to themselves? sift them? weigh them? and

see what amount of pain, grief, or vexation their utterance may have inflicted?

No, seldom; scarcely ever, perhaps never; so never till that last great day, when our thoughts will sound in our ears like words, and when our words will stand before us like deeds, shall we ever know or see what gaping wounds these same light careless words have made. Then shall we see where the sword stabbed and the blow bruised, but till then, no doubt we shall go on all the same—evil-speaking, lying, and slandering—harsh-sounding sins, but all committed under the specious cloak of “careless words!”

Almost every sentence that Miss Maynard had spoken that day at dinner, had contained something in it to pain or annoy Mr. Bohun, and her last was the climax.

What was not wise? what was not politic? why, in his own home, was he to be wise? why, under his own brother's roof, was he obliged to be politic? and if so, what was to be his particular line of policy? conciliatory? that implied a want of present cordiality, and how did Miss Maynard know that cordiality did *not* exist between this important personage and himself?

How indeed? how but because “people” said so!

The ladies rose just as Mr. Bohun was saying to himself, “This is all very uncomfortable,” and he found his next neighbour was then old Mr. Melville, a congenial spirit under the circumstances.

Yet he too began in a somewhat similar strain, complaining of how little he had seen of his friend of late.

“Then,” said Mr. Bohun, “I suppose what all the world says must be true, and I am really growing morose and ogreish; but upon my word I have taken precisely the same walks at the same hours, paid the same visits, and sat in my room exactly in the same place for the last four months, as I have for the last four years—how then can these accusations be just?”

“I have been wishing to speak to you on many matters connected with the parish,” began Mr. Melville; “in the first place, about repairing the interior of the church. I have been calculating that we might collect a very handsome sum in subscriptions, if I might head the list by your name and that of Sir Felix——”

"We are always ready, my dear sir," interrupted Mr. Bohun, "but let me beg of you to lay the matter first before my brother and Lady Bohun."

"I know that is the proper course," returned the old rector; "but you are aware, dear Mr. Bohun, that we are all so much in the habit of appealing to you as our fountain-head, that any departure from the old-established custom seems to me quite like an omission."

"Thank you for the compliment, old friend," said Mr. Bohun; "but let it be understood from henceforth, that it is not pleasant for me to be drawn from the retirement which I have chosen; in fact, I am nobody here now, and I must not be consulted first on points like these."

"I am sorry, but you shall be obeyed, because you are right," was the rector's reply; "only, dear sir, it never *was* so, and I certainly had hoped things would have remained on the same footing as formerly. It is a disappointment to me."

Here again! Mr. Bohun could bear it no longer. He turned himself towards Mr. Melville on his chair, and throwing his arm over the back of it, at once dashed into his subject.

"My good old friend, you are not the first person who has used similar words to me this day. I have spent all this snowy morning with Mrs. Trant, and we have had a long and serious conversation on my present position at Bohun Court. You are quite correct in saying that things are no longer on the same footing as formerly. It is perfectly true; so much so, that I consulted Mrs. Trant very earnestly to-day, as to whether it would not be much better for me no longer to make this house my home——"

The rector started.

"Yes," continued Mr. Bohun, "I consulted her because I have great confidence in her judgment, as also in yours, my dear friend; so, after her, I was coming to you."

"What did Mrs. Trant say?" asked the old man anxiously.

"She was against any change at present."

"So am I!" exclaimed Mr. Melville, without a moment's hesitation. "So am I, decidedly."

"On what grounds?"

"Because Bohun Court cannot do without you."

"That was not Mrs. Trant's reason."

"What then?"

"She was of opinion that, for my brother's sake, in the eyes of the world, it would be more—more——"

"Politic," suggested the rector. (Miss Maynard's objectionable word!)

"It would look better," modified Mr. Bohun, "that no change were made at present; but I confess this is not my opinion. I think he (or she) who takes up his residence with a newly-married couple, commits a great mistake, and that mistake I have made. I see it, and I am ready to rectify it. My only hesitation is, from what Mrs. Trant said this morning, that various unpleasant rumours as to discord within the walls of Bohun Court are just now afloat, and that the best contradiction that could be given to them would be, my continued stay here."

"True, true, very true!" sighed Mr. Melville.

"But my mind is not made up," continued Mr. Bohun, "and until I have consulted with my brother, I can come to no resolution. I did consult with him just before his marriage. I represented to him that if only for my own comfort, I wished him to let me leave him——"

"And he could not spare you? no, nor can we, Mr. Bohun."

"Mr. Melville, you must remember that my brother is a very easy man, disliking anything like business or trouble, and hitherto I have certainly been able to save him from both, partly from circumstances during his married life, but still more from his long absences from home, and his positive refusal to attend to the estate during his widowhood. The fact is, that I have been so pushed into the foreground, my dear sir, that I actually find it difficult to be beaten back," and Mr. Bohun laughed half bitterly, half good-humouredly.

"Well," said the rector, "now that *you* have spoken, let *me* speak. As to being beaten back, I trust it may never, never, come to that."

"Exactly—but I wish to retire before there is a chance of it."

"Then as to Sir Felix; the same disinclination for business which he has always shown still clings to him.

If you leave Bohun Court, it will be thrown upon the hands of servants or stewards, and then ——”

“Pardon me,” interrupted Mr. Bohun, with a touch of *hauteur* which very rarely appeared in his manner to any one, much less to this, his oldest friend, “pardon me, but in that case, everything will be in the hands of Lady Bohun.”

“And is that wise?” asked Mr. Melville.

“What do you mean?” questioned Mr. Bohun, in his turn, recalling instantly Miss Maynard’s mysterious warning words, and seeing now the prospect of their solution; “how do you mean that it is not wise?”

“My dear friend!” exclaimed the old man, energetically, “when a man at your brother’s time of life falls into the hands of a young wife, woe betide him who has been looked upon all his life as heir presumptive!”

Mr. Bohun drew a very long breath. “That’s it, is it?” said he; “that, then, is what people mean by my not being wise, and not being politic? My neighbours imagine that I live under my brother’s roof to be a spy upon his actions, and for the sake of what I can get! My dear friend, if it has come to this, it is, indeed, high time that I should go.”

“You have taken a wrong view of the case,” said the rector; “what we mean is, that there may be no heirs to Bohun Court. In that case, though your position remains what it has ever been, your interests, under present circumstances, require more looking after.”

Mr. Bohun laughed.

“You all amuse me,” said he, “you speak out so openly; but can you possibly think that Sir Felix would marry a young wife, and not leave her everything he had in the world?”

“Everything, save Bohun Court,” exclaimed Mr. Melville, hastily; “he has so often spoken to me of his devotion to this old place, and of *your* devotion to it, and his fears that no lady would ever appreciate it, and take the care he or you would wish taken of it, that I cannot conceive its passing from you. Suppose now, for instance, the widow were to marry again?”

“What good can I do, or what harm can I prevent, by overlooking in the lifetime of the rightful owners?”

“Many things; for instance, supposing you were in the

direct line to inherit, should you like any trees about here cut down ? ”

“ Certainly not ; but ladies don't often interfere with the timber on an estate.”

“ Just before this frost I happened to be resting on a bank outside Bohun Woods ; Lady Bohun and her maid were standing very near me ; accidentally I overheard the conversation. Lady Bohun was lamenting the thickness of the firs, and wishing to have more open views of the house ; her maid was marking trees with a piece of chalk——”

Mr. Bohun pinched in his lips. “ No orders have been given for any trees to be cut down,” said he, temperately ; but any one could have seen by the expression of his face that such an act would be next to drawing his own life-blood.

“ The next words I heard were, how much better Bohun Court would look whitewashed.”

“ Who said that ? ” cried Mr. Bohun, his eyes lighting up with a flash like fire.

“ The maid.”

“ And Lady Bohun—— ? ”

“ Lady Bohun perfectly agreed.”

The disgust on Mr. Bohun's face was almost ludicrous from its intensity, but he said nothing. He pushed back his chair, and rose.

“ Well ? ” inquired his old friend, “ now do you think it better to go or stay ? ”

“ Stay,” was the laconic reply.

“ I thought so. It is wisest.”

“ You are right,” returned Mr. Bohun, “ it is wisest ; but if any further remarks are made, remember, old friend, that I stay from wisdom, not policy ; I stay to preserve Bohun Court from desecration, not for any advantage I can gain, for, as I said before, it is absurd to imagine that from the moment Sir Felix married a young wife, any soul but that young wife would have either part or parcel in his worldly goods and chattels. Besides,” he added, lightly, as the guests proceeded into the drawing-room, “ we shall most likely hear the sound of merry little voices, and the tread of nimble little feet through the galleries of Bohun Court before many years have passed away, and then, what will have been the use of all my wisdom, and all my policy ? ”

"Wait till you hear them," said the rector, prophetically; "wait; but Bohun Court never heard them yet, and never may; so all I say is, wait!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE old house was snowed up for many days, and the prisoner-guests amused themselves as best they could. Lady Bohun and Miss Maynard led the revels, and when at last a bright, cheery morning dawned, and nothing of the snow was left save a patch here and there in a shady corner, people were half sorry.

"As for me," said Miss Maynard, "I am grieved. I never enjoyed a visit more. Don't you regret the snow, Lady Bohun?"

"Not I!" exclaimed the young lady; "I hate snow. It makes this house look like a large hearse. I never saw snow lie so heavily anywhere in my life. It shows how cold the situation is."

"Two reflections upon Bohun Court in one sentence," thought somebody in the room.

"In what happy hemisphere may you have resided, never to have seen a heavier fall than this?" asked young Montgomery, who was lounging in the recess of the next window.

"I have seen many a heavier fall," retorted Lady Bohun; "but papa never allowed the snow to lie about *our* grounds, that is what I meant."

"Ah!" said Miss Maynard, carelessly, "it is easier to sweep up a lawn than such an extent of park as this."

"Only the lawn at *my* home happens to be of greater extent than the park here," was Lady Bohun's answer, whilst the colour rushed into her cheeks. She had a great dislike to any one imagining that she had not been used to quite as much luxury at home, if not more, than she had found at Bohun Court.

"Berrington," whispered Mr. Montgomery, "where has the beautiful simpleton lived all her life?"

"Oh! in some London suburb."

"Cockney villa, eh?"

"I think so, only on a very large scale. The father is a man of immense wealth."

"Then she doesn't know how to appreciate antiquities."

"Not she. She despises this mouldy old mansion."

Mr. Bohun heard all but the first sentence, and by the colour in Euphemia's face he fancied she had also, and came immediately to the rescue.

"Lady Bohun," said he, clearly and distinctly, "you must introduce some modern improvements amongst us. We must strike you as quite benighted after the state of perfection to which ornamental gardening has been brought in *your* home. I assure you, when my brother came down here after a certain memorable visit to town, or rather its neighbourhood, he called everything at Bohun Court dingy!"

Miss Maynard came behind him and pinched his arm.

"Well done," she whispered; "now that I call generous and magnificent of you."

But Euphemia had not any of those finer feelings which would have appreciated generosity of this kind. She only saw in the remarks of her brother-in-law a proper admission of the inferiority of Bohun Court to The Laurels, and her eyes sparkled triumphantly as she laughed and answered,

"Oh! we taught Sir Felix a good deal I dare say, though I cannot say he has profited much. However, that does not signify, for I assure you I am only waiting for a little fine weather to set seriously to work and completely new-model Bohun Court."

"Look, how aghast Mr. Bohun stands," whispered Miss Maynard again, but this time the whisper was to the young hostess.

"Why?" exclaimed Euphemia, opening her eyes, "what on earth is it to *him*!"

The look, the air, the intonation, all spoke volumes, and Miss Maynard felt the question unanswerable, though it

was to those who heard it a painful truth. It was, indeed, nothing now to him, and the day might come when it would be even less. Were the little feet and the little voices ever to sound through the polished oak galleries of that old house, it would be nothing more to him than the memory of a dream.

And now the guests were all gone, and Sir Felix and Lady Bohun were left, not exactly to themselves, but with only the "third person," as Euphemia had now actually begun to speak of Mr. Bohun to Ponsford.

It then occurred to Sir Felix that he had made his young wife some sort of promise, that day of the theatricals, which he had not yet performed, and one morning he screwed up his courage—yes, it required screwing up—to speak to his brother as they sat over a heap of business papers, about the various grievances which she had laid before him. He resolved to begin upon the least first.

"Guy, my dear fellow, I wanted, by the bye, whilst I think of it, to ask you about Hector; has he not grown rather more noisy than usual?"

"Not that I have observed," replied his brother.

"Well, it strikes me he has. I don't recollect ever having heard him howl at night so much before."

"Has he really been howling? He bays at the moon on bright nights, I know, but I have not heard him howl. I am a good sleeper certainly, but a howl from Hector would wake me in a moment."

"The face of his kennel is toward our windows, perhaps that may have something to do with it."

"It shall be turned."

"I doubt if that would make it much better; Euphemia is a very light sleeper, and has been sadly disturbed by him lately, only, knowing your affection for the dog—and, indeed, mine too—she has forborne complaining."

Mr. Bohun was silent for a few minutes, and a shadow came across his face.

"What does Lady Bohun wish?" said he, at last.

"It is I who am agitating the question, my dear Guy," returned Sir Felix, nervously, as well as evasively; "I who am trying to see what can be done, not Euphemia."

"Yes, I understand," said Mr. Bohun coldly.

Sir Felix began to tear a pen to pieces. He felt and looked extremely nervous, more so than his brother had ever seen him; so much so, indeed, that Mr. Bohun sat and looked at him sorrowfully, and then for the first time he saw that a change had come over him, and that he had aged ten years since he had come down to Bohun Court one short year before, and announced his intended marriage.

So Mr. Bohun sat and looked in sorrow and pity.

"Felix," said he, at last, "you don't look well. You look worried."

"And so I am," was the candid and abrupt reply.

"About what?"

"About fifty things."

"Not about Hector, surely?"

"Yes, he is amongst the fifty."

"You wish him sent down to the kennels?"

"Would you object to it?"

"Of course you know that if he goes there I lose my companion. He looks for his two walks a day with me as regularly as clock work, but if he is sent a mile away, I must cut off one of these, and that, I suspect, will make him howl in reality."

Sir Felix saw a loop-hole. "If the wind sets this way," said he, quickly, "we hear the dogs down at the kennels distinctly."

"We certainly do," said Mr. Bohun.

"Then I will tell Euphemia so!" exclaimed his brother, much relieved; "and I have no doubt she will then prefer matters remaining as they are."

Mr. Bohun concealed a smile. It amused him in a painful sort of way, to see the reign of thralldom which had just begun to dawn on the husband of six months; it was something new, so entirely new, that Mr. Bohun could hardly realise it, although its effects were always presenting themselves before his eyes. The worst part of it was that it seemed to be affecting his brother's health. Had it not been for that, he would have laughed it to scorn; as it was, he tried how a little cheerfulness would do.

"Come," said he, gaily, "you have only told me of one trouble, and there are forty-nine left. Having settled one, let us get on to the next."

But instead of answering in the same spirit, Sir Felix, to Mr. Bohun's great surprise, suddenly hid his face in his hands.

"Oh, Guy, Guy!" he exclaimed; "there are times when I feel as if I had more troubles than I can talk of, even to you. I don't know what has come to me. I feel unhinged, shaky, not myself; and yet if you ask me to put these troubles into a tangible form, I cannot. Things worry me now that never used to worry me in old days, and I get one thought into my mind sometimes, which preys on it for days and days, and wears me to a shadow, mind and body."

"Have you such a thought now?" asked Mr. Bohun.

"Yes," was the answer, and there was a dead silence. In the midst of it, there was a slight rustle at the door.

"Lady Bohun!" exclaimed Sir Felix, under his voice, and flushing up very red.

His brother rose, and opened the door quickly. There was no one there.

"No one, Guy?"

"No one to be seen."

"How strange. I certainly fancied——however, it must have been fancy."

"A fancy I shared with you, Felix. But to return to our subject. You were speaking of a thought sometimes preying on your mind, and haunting you for days and days; this is a morbid state in which you ought not to indulge——"

"Indulge? Good heavens! Do you suppose such an incubus is any indulgence?"

"I mean that it is weak of you to suffer a painful thought to master you. Rouse yourself, and dispel the dream."

"If it were a dream, I could do so. It is no dream. It is a reality."

"And a mystery, apparently, for I do not understand you."

The eyes of Sir Felix glanced towards the door; he seemed about to speak, then seemed to hesitate, change his mind, and finally relapsed into his former state.

"I don't think you are well," said Mr. Bohun at last, having for some time attentively regarded him in unbroken silence.

"Perhaps not."

"Would not a little change do you good?"

"Where could I go?"

"The idea! why, anywhere, everywhere, for change of scene, if not for change of air. You never used to think anything of running up to town a little while ago?"

"Ah! moving *en garçon*, and moving with a retinue, are two very different things. I have had so much moving, so much trouble and worry, and fatigue, for the last six months, that really I dread the very name of a journey now."

"But why not run up for a day or two by yourself?"

Sir Felix hesitated.

"You would soon get rid of this thought of yours," pursued Mr. Bohun; but his brother shook his head wearily.

"Will you go?" asked Mr. Bohun, abruptly.

"I have a good deal to talk about before I think of a journey for recreation," at last answered Sir Felix, "and we may not have so good an opportunity for some time. The next question I wanted to ask you was about your——"

"But Felix, will you first tell me what harasses you? Don't leave that subject for a new one."

"We can go back to that, Guy."

"No time like the present, my good brother."

At that instant the door suddenly opened, but till we retrace our steps half-an-hour, the intruder must remain un-named.

Lady Bohun had been sitting in her boudoir, the octagon, as it was still called, and being a person of no pursuits, had found time hanging very heavy on the hands which could neither play, nor draw, nor work, unless the everlasting strip which never advanced an inch, could be dignified by the latter name.

The house was very quiet that day. She was wondering where Sir Felix could be. She was puzzling to think if she could find some excuse to ring for Ponsford, anything, in fact, for company, and to kill time, when there came at the door a peculiar little rap—a rap like finger nails, not the usual rap with the knuckles.

"Come in, Ponsford," said her ladyship, and the lady's-maid obeyed. "Well?"

Ponsford's appearance, unsummoned, was always indicative of some secret intelligence.

"My lady, Sir Felix and Mr. Bohun have been in the library together for more than an hour. I happened to be drying your ladyship's flowers in the hall."

"I thought so! I suspected as much!" exclaimed Euphemia; "and alone, of course?"

"Oh, yes, my lady!"

"What were they talking about?"

"I think it was about the farms, my lady, and the renovating of the church, but they came to Hector at last."

"At last! You may well say at last! And so Sir Felix has actually recollected that abominable dog at last! Well, what did Mr. Bohun say? Is anything settled?"

"Oh, yes, my lady!" said Ponsford, with her gentle laugh; "settled in a very few sentences, by Mr. Bohun. Hector is not to go away."

Lady Bohun coloured crimson. "And who said so, pray?"

"Sir Felix did his utmost, my lady; but indeed, as your ladyship will surely see some day, Mr. Bohun always had, and always will have, his own way. Sir Felix thought the dog had better be sent to the kennels, but Mr. Bohun thought not, and so the matter ended."

"But the matter has *not* ended!" cried Euphemia, starting up; "when it ends, it shall be in a very different way. Give me my strip of work, Ponsford—quick!—and my thimble. What more did you hear?"

"Just as Sir Felix was going to say something very particular, my lady, and just as Mr. Bohun was drawing him out, as it were, the hall-door opened, and the wind came rushing up, and blew my dress against the library door, upon which Mr. Bohun rose like a shot——"

"And you were discovered?"

"Oh, dear no, my lady!"—Ponsford's laugh was a little sarcastic this time—"besides, if I had been, I should have asked for your ladyship's strip of work."

"Give it me," cried Lady Bohun, "give it me, quick!—there, that will do—why do I stand gossiping here? Thank you."

And in another moment Lady Bohun entered the library. Sir Felix rose on her arrival. Mr. Bohun did not stir.

The former gave her the chair she usually occupied on the occasions of these visits, and the latter went on with some calculations he was making, unfortunately quite unconscious of a pair of cold blue eyes fixed with unflinching steadiness on his offending head.

"Are you coming out to take a little walk, Sir Felix?" she asked.

"My dearest, it pours," was the reply.

"How provoking! Then will you come and sit in my boudoir?"

"Will you not give us the pleasure of your company here?" said Sir Felix.

Had he said "me," instead of "us," she might have complied, but the objectionable plural opened the vial of wrath.

"No thank you. If you and Mr. Bohun are engaged, I had better go back to my solitude."

This was a pleasant speech for Mr. Bohun to hear. It was intended for his special edification, and he knew it perfectly. Mortal man could not have remained in the room after it, and the only wonder was how he kept his temper and refrained from a retort; but one look at his brother's face kept his tongue silent, and made his heart swell with sorrow instead of indignation.

"I am going," was all he answered; "the little we had to say is said and settled."

And without even a look, which could further wound his already wounded brother, he quietly left the room.

CHAPTER XVII.

WHEN two people are going to have a few words together, which they do not wish to utter before a third person, consequently not likely to be very agreeable words, and when they only wait the exit of that third person to begin the conversation, the first few moments of the *tête-à-tête* are generally awkward ones for both parties. Neither seems

quite to know how to begin. In the present case, Sir Felix courteously gave up the privilege to Lady Bohun, and certainly she was the most fitted, of the two, to commence the attack.

"Settled," said she, repeating the last word, as if it had been ringing in her ears, which indeed it had. "Settled! What have you settled, Sir Felix?"

This was opening the battle bravely; and it showed so distinctly the spirit in which she had entered the room, that Sir Felix now saw he must nerve himself for the emergency. Unfortunately, he did not feel well that day, and people out of sorts are indisposed to combat a point with much vehemence. His reply, therefore, was very mild. In few words, he explained the subjects of his conversation with his brother, and ended by saying,

"So I hope, my dearest, everything will be arranged for your comfort. That is what Guy meant by the word settled."

"But what is settled?" persisted Euphemia. "I don't see that you have altered anything. You have merely settled that things shall remain as they have been all along, and to that I do not agree. It is very fine to say 'settled,' but the person to settle the things in this house is myself, Sir Felix—next to you. You seem to have settled that Mr. Bohun is to retain that room, the original boudoir?"

"I had not come to that point."

"You have settled that he is to continue to smoke at all hours under Ponsford's window?"

"My dearest, you interrupted us before I had introduced that little grievance."

"Little grievance! Do you know, Sir Felix, that if it goes on, I verily believe Ponsford will give warning?"

"Can she not change her room, Euphemia?"

"Certainly not. Well, then, if you have not spoken to him on two out of the three requests I made you, have you broached the third?"

"You mean about Hector? Yes; I spoke about Hector, and suggested his being sent down to the kennels. Guy says if he is, he will howl in reality, and we shall be disturbed night and day. Guy suggests that we turn his kennel away from the house."

"Stuff!" cried Lady Bohun, with more emphasis than

politeness; "as if that would be of the slightest use! No, Sir Felix, the dog must go—I am quite decided about that. If you dislike saying so to Mr. Bohun, I will."

"No," interrupted her husband hastily; "if you wish it so much, it shall be done. I can tell Guy after luncheon. Just now I do not feel very well—my head seems to swim."

"All those stupid accounts. Why do you trouble yourself with them? Everybody else in your position has a man to do these sort of things for them."

"Guy and I have always managed Bohun Court ourselves," said Sir Felix, and Lady Bohun was silenced for the time in spite of herself.

But she was not dissatisfied with the result of that *tête-à-tête*, small as the triumph was. It was a triumph, all the same, and every one, however insignificant, told in the end.

"The dog is to go, Ponsford," said she, on her return to her room, "and that is something gained, at all events;" and Ponsford smiled approvingly.

That day several visitors came over to Bohun Court, and stayed to luncheon. Euphemia liked company, and always made herself agreeable on these occasions, except to one or two people who were old friends of the family, and to these she was barely civil. Mrs. Trant was one of these, and Mr. Melville another.

As for Mrs. Trant, she who had always been a sort of standing-dish in the time of all the Lady Bohuns, her presence at the table was now a very rare event. The old lady was punctilious. She did not like, now there was a mistress to the house, to avail herself of the frequent invitations of the master and his brother. Neither did she quite like the verbal general invitations of Lady Bohun. A general invitation she knew was no invitation at all.

"People who give you general invitations, dear Mr. Bohun," said she, one day, "never really want you to come. It is a polite way of keeping you away, because, if you honestly wish to see a friend at dinner, it is very easy to fix a day, or even in extreme cases give a choice of days—not a general invitation. I always feel that as the greatest slight that an acquaintance can inflict upon me."

So poor old Mrs. Trant, shy and sensitive, seldom found

her way to Bohun Court, and at last Sir Felix noticed it—not to the old lady, but to his wife.

Lady Bohun extricated herself from the difficulty with great ease.

"I ask her repeatedly, dear Sir Felix, but I never can get her to come. I was there only yesterday, and begged her to walk home with me and dine quietly, but she would not."

"My dearest, at her age you could not expect her to walk. We always sent the pony carriage for her."

"Well, I did not know that—how could I? I could do no more than invite her. If she cannot be induced to come, it is not my fault."

"She cannot be well. She always used to be so ready to join all our parties. But I suppose she is growing old, like the rest of us," and Sir Felix laughed.

Amongst those who sat that day at the luncheon table was Mr. Melville. As Sir Felix uttered these words, he looked up at him, and, turning to Mr. Bohun, remarked how very ill his brother was looking.

"I was noticing it this very morning," said Mr. Bohun, "and begging him to take a trip up to town for change of air and scene. He is evidently very far from well. Look how his hand shakes."

Sir Felix was pouring out a glass of wine at the moment, and could hardly do it. Euphemia, who had the faculty of hearing all that was said by everybody at table, looked at her husband, and coloured crimson.

"So!" thought she to herself, "that is what they have settled, is it?—something more than the disposal of Hector! but, I flatter myself, I can put an extinguisher on this plan at all events, if it is one of Mr. Bohun's bright ideas."

She was wary enough, however, to say nothing at the time. She waited her opportunity, for she knew Sir Felix would not take any steps without giving her some sort of notice, so she waited patiently.

"What time do you wish to drive to-day?" asked her husband, as they rose from table.

"Not to drive at all," said she, "but to take a ride with you;" and Sir Felix was so much flattered by the proposal, that, ill as he felt, he gladly entered into it.

They started at three o'clock, and only returned home in

time to dress for dinner. All the afternoon Mr. Bohun had been waiting about, hoping to waylay his brother, and impress upon him the necessity of either change of air or medical advice.

Infinite, therefore, was his surprise when, at dinner, Lady Bohun coolly announced that she and Sir Felix were going up to town the following day, "for a little change."

"Oh! you go, too?" said Mr. Bohun, inadvertently.

"Why," exclaimed Euphemia, opening her eyes, "you do not suppose I would let dear Sir Felix go alone? particularly now that he is not quite well? He has moped himself to death here. I intend him to have a little London gaiety, and then when I come back, I hope mamma and some of *my* friends may come and enliven us."

Mr. Bohun looked down, and said nothing. It was always with some amiable little speech like this that Lady Bohun wound up her sentences, but he had learnt now to receive them in silence.

Still, it was impossible for him not to see, with poignant regret, how every day revealed some fresh trait of the craftiness and unamiability of her character.

"To what will it lead?" was always the thought uppermost in his mind, yet what but time could decide that question? There was nothing for it now but to watch, to wait, and to regret.

So Bohun Court was to be left once more to Mr. Bohun and Hector.

"By the bye," said Euphemia to her husband, just before they started, "you told Mr. Bohun about Hector, I suppose?"

"I quite forgot!" exclaimed Sir Felix: "but, as we are going away, perhaps it will keep for another time."

"Oh! nevermind now," returned Euphemia, coolly, and she left the room. In the hall, as fate would have it, she met Mr. Bohun with the offender by his side.

"Mr. Bohun," said she, "Sir Felix forgot to tell you that Hector disturbs me exceedingly. I must beg that by the time I return, you will find some other place for him."

"Certainly," replied her brother-in-law, "the kennels—"

"Anywhere out of hearing," retorted Lady Bohun, pointedly, and went on her way.

So disagreeable was the impression made upon Mr.

Bohun by these words, and the tone in which they were delivered, that they haunted him all day. Like a restless spirit, when the confusion of the departure was over, did he wander through all the deserted rooms, the dog by his side, and think sadly over the days gone by, when Bohun Court was to him what it never could be again.

He entered, at last, Lady Bohun's boudoir, a room he had scarcely seen, for she had never invited him in, and seemed purposely to avoid doing so, but now the door stood wide open, and he paused and gazed around.

How altered! how perfectly different to what it once had been! Not a vestige of the old furniture left—not even a tint on the walls the same. Everything was white, and gold, and gay colouring. The carpet dark, rich, and with a broad border of rather gaudy colours; the curtains to match, and a heavy but handsome *portière* hiding the doors which communicated with the dining-room, recently put up to intercept the draught of which Lady Bohun had once complained.

Then, on the tables and scattered about, were such a multiplicity of little fancy objects, bearing Paris on their faces; statuettes on brackets, vases of Bohemian glass, cups and tazzas of Sèvres china, books, paper-knives, ink-stands, and work-baskets; all, in short, heaped together in beautiful confusion.

Then the chairs and sofas! No wonder her dainty ladyship so seldom graced the drawing-room with her presence; in this, her own peculiar room, was a chair or a sofa for every hour of the day, and every frame of her fitful mind, and about a dozen cushions of every form and device under the sun.

"No," thought he to himself, "I never should have known the room again;" and as he still continued to gaze, the heavy *portière* was suddenly put aside, and a figure stood before him—Ponsford—the vampire!

A graceful start, and a shrinking back, and then a sliding advance, marked her recognition of his presence, and then, with her usual patronizing gentleness, she exclaimed,

"Oh! Mr. Bohun, don't let me disturb you, sir" (he had evinced no intention of being disturbed, but had walked into the recess of the window, and was looking

out), "I am just putting away a few of her ladyship's things."

"Do you not accompany Lady Bohun, then?" asked Mr. Bohun, surprised to see her there.

"I follow her ladyship, sir," was the reply, uttered with a sort of dignified affability, "but I could not leave before I had put away a few of her ladyship's particular favourites which might be injured by exposure to the air: besides, I have to lock up these rooms; but," she added, "there is no hurry, sir—pray do not go on my account."

Mr. Bohun could hardly conceal a smile at the idea of being permitted by Ponsford to remain in the room! However, he said nothing; but stood quietly in the window, and watched her as she glided about. He amused himself thus for several minutes, till at last he saw that he was himself being watched by her! that instead of putting away, and locking up, she flitted from table to table, and chair to chair, and did nothing! evidently, on the contrary (and ostentatiously), waiting for him to go.

And with inward disgust and contempt he at last did go, and angrily shut himself up in his den.

"That woman infuriates me with myself," thought he, as he threw himself into his chair; "she rouses in me all sorts of ill-feeling, malice, and hatred, which would otherwise remain dormant in my composition. Thank goodness, in two hours the house will be rid of her."

Yes, in two hours, for a glance at a Bradshaw had shown him that in two hours the last train that day would start—"And in two hours," thought he, "she cannot do much harm, luckily."

But in direful contradiction of this comfortable self-assurance, there came in one short hour afterwards, a sharp, quick knock at Mr. Bohun's door, and at his rather startled permission to "Come in," the figure of the trim old housekeeper instantly presented itself.

A patch of colour, like paint, was on each cheekbone of Mrs. Dance's usually pale and placid face, and her hands trembled nervously, as she vainly endeavoured to keep her fingers decorously interlaced.

"May I make bold, sir," she began, "to say a few words to you?"

Mr. Bohun laughed.

"Why, Dance, I suppose if you wish it, you must; but I confess I always dread 'a few words,' just as a burnt child—you know the rest."

"Ah! sir, I am truly sorry, and I don't wonder at your dreading it, for I am sure I know what it is to dread just as you do, sir; but things cannot go on as they do, sir, and now they have come to a pitch that really obliges me to speak to you."

"Well, Dance, say on then, but you must at the same time bear in mind how scrupulously I have for months past abstained from the slightest interference, direct or indirect, with the affairs of this household."

"True, sir; but in the absence of Sir Felix, this is a case in which I hope you will see fit to interfere. Mrs. Ponsford, not satisfied with locking up the reception rooms, so that if you had friends to dinner you would not have a room to sit in but this, has also asked for the keys of the store-room, and declares that my lady ordered her to lock that up too!"

Mr. Bohun was silent and perplexed. "This seems strange," was all he could say.

"But is it to be allowed, sir?" asked the old housekeeper, hastily. "Am I to give them up? because Mrs. Ponsford is waiting for them."

"By Lady Bohun's orders?"

"So she says, sir."

"Then give them up, Dance."

The old woman paused a moment. "You desire it, sir?" said she.

"Not I, I have nothing to do with it. You ask my advice, apparently, not my orders—for those I am not empowered or disposed to give; but my advice is, comply quietly with the commands left by Lady Bohun."

"Then, sir," said the little housekeeper, drawing up the trim figure; "may I humbly beg you to—to let me resign my place here—the situation must be filled by some one else—I am not the person to suit my lady—I saw your good father and mother married, and Sir Felix and yourself christened, Mr. Guy, and I did hope to live and serve you to the last, but it can't be done, sir—I have tried my utmost and it can't be done. I humbly beg

to give warning, sir—for the first time in my life—and if you will please to break it to Sir Felix——”

Vexed beyond concealment, yet nearly betrayed into a smile by the last expression, Mr. Bohun now instantly put an extinguisher on the conversation.

“No, Dance,” said he, “that you must do yourself. I hope, on reflection, you will see how very foolish it will be of you to do any such thing, but if you persist, the act must be your own. As for me, you are in my eyes so completely part and parcel of Bohun Court, that I should as soon think of the old house itself marching, as of your leaving it. However, with that I have nothing to do, and let me know nothing about it. I believe the best advice I can give you is, to obey the ruling powers.”

“It is very hard, at my time of life,” sobbed the old woman; “and very bitter to have a young woman like that set over one’s head.”

“We have all our trials and troubles,” returned Mr. Bohun; “I remember my mother used to say everybody had something to bear for somebody else’s sake.”

“Yes, Mr. Guy, but then you care for them. It is hard to suffer for a thankless person. I would bear anything in the world for the sake of you or Felix, but for Mrs. Ponsford!——”

Mr. Bohun began to walk up and down the room in silence—the old lady took the silence as a hint for her absence—and the interview closed; but, as she left the room, Mr. Bohun instinctively glanced at the clock—one hour only remained—“in an hour the house will be free of her”—and he drew a long breath.

But again the door opens. The tall, portly old butler appears.

“If you please, sir, William wants to speak to you.”

William was one of the stable men, and a doubtful adherent of the family. People said he was rather won over by the honeyed words of Mrs. Ponsford, for whom he often rode on errands to the adjacent town. He did not belong particularly to either Sir Felix or Mr. Bohun, but was a sort of supernumerary, and did work for all parties.

He came in shamefaced, rather red, and not looking Mr. Bohun straight in the face. Hector, lying on the rug, gave a low growl like distant thunder, as he entered.

"What is it?" asked Mr. Bohun, almost inclined to say, "What is it *now*?"

"If you please, sir—I'm to drive Mrs. Ponsford to the station."

"Well?" with an impatient jerk of the head.

"And please, sir, shall I take Hector down to the kennels first?"

Mr. Bohun looked as if he did not understand.

"Hector down to the kennels? What do you mean?"

"Mrs. Ponsford, sir——"

Mr. Bohun's eyes glared, and he forgot himself.

"What the devil have either you or Mrs. Ponsford to do with taking Hector down to the kennels?"

The man grew redder still.

"Beg pardon, sir, but Mrs. Ponsford said her orders was not to leave the house till the dog was——was——"

"Was what?"

"Disposed of, sir, was her words."

And now Mr. Bohun set his teeth very hard. If he had a weak point in the world, it was Hector. About Hector he was as foolish as a child, and to think that this woman, whose rule was now spreading all over the house, should presume to extend her influence beyond it, and dictate to the out-door servants, was beyond endurance. No! Perhaps Hector should go to the kennels, but not now; not at that woman's bidding.

"Leave the room," said Mr. Bohun, neither calmly nor temperately; "leave the room, and the next time you dare to enter my presence on such an errand, is your last hour in the service of Sir Felix Bohun. Leave the room, and let me caution you to beware. Down! Hector."

The dog had risen; he stood close by his master's side, the corners of his mouth hanging down, his eyes gleaming with the red light which always gave them their fearful expression when their owner was displeased; he kept looking alternately from master to man, as if asking permission to be allowed to dart forward and strangle the latter, since his instinct told him that he and the former were falling out, and his affection prompted expeditious punishment. But the "Down! Hector," restrained the hot blood, and on the man's speedy retreat, the dog re-

turned to his rug, and his master to his walk up and down the room.

As he did so, the words of Miss Maynard, spoken in one of her wild, careless moods recurred to him.

"Yes," thought he, "the poison has begun to work; the vampire has begun at her deadly trade, sucking away comfort, peace, and happiness! Miss Maynard was right."

Suddenly—a draught of air in the room—he stopped, started—there she stood before him, calm, pale, and with a face which looked like a Parian lamp with the light shining behind it. There was something so singular in this transparency of Ponsford's complexion that no one who ever saw her could fail to be struck with it.

Mr. Bohun stood, struck dumb at her effrontery.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Bohun," said she, with a smile—a smile, to re-assure him!—"but I thought you said 'Come in?'"

"I am not aware that you knocked at all at my door," replied Mr. Bohun, in a tone which would have daunted any one else.

"Indeed I did, sir; but the fact is, my train obliges me to be abrupt—so you will forgive the intrusion, I hope. Her ladyship left several orders with me which, I believe, I have now executed, all excepting one—your dog, excuse me, sir—did I understand rightly from William? Her ladyship left orders with me to see that it was removed before her return—that means, of course, *removed to-day*, otherwise I could not personally superintend——"

"Mrs. Ponsford," broke in Mr. Bohun, "I cannot believe that the orders you received from Lady Bohun could possibly extend to matters quite beyond your jurisdiction. Confine yourself, if you please, to affairs over which you have a right to exercise authority—not to mine, I beg."

Another smile, soft and pitying. "Her ladyship, sir, so distinctly mentioned the dog, and expressed such an unmistakable wish—an order, in fact—that she should not find it within hearing on her return, in short, that I should see, myself, that it was conveyed to a distance entirely out of hearing, that unless I decidedly fail in gaining your permission, I must see the orders carried into effect."

"You have failed," was Mr. Bohun's reply.

Her eyes met his. His quailed, not hers !

"Am I at liberty to tell her ladyship this?" she asked, still gently, for Ponsford never raised her voice, never got excited, never looked angry. On occasions when most eyes sparkle or flash fire, she prudently veiled hers with those large white lids.

"Pray say what you please," said he. She made him a curtsy which a *débutante* at Court might have envied, and wishing him good afternoon, in her usual voice, left the room.

Mr. Bohun glanced again at the clock, and saw it wanted half an hour of the time.

"It will take her that to get to the station. She will miss the train, by Jove!"

And he grew uneasy, pacing the room with hurried step and a quivering lip, feeling, to the tips of his fingers, how, under a semblance of perfect civility, a menial had that day found means to insult and infuriate him.

"Will she miss the train?" he again thought; and again the very minutes were counted. If she missed it, she would return to Bohun Court—sleep under the same roof as himself—exhale, like the upas, her poison throughout the atmosphere he breathed.

But, hush! Wheels driving round his side of the house. Wheels—a pause—and wheels again. She was off; but, perhaps, not gone. She might miss the train; and Mr. Bohun deliberately sat down in his chair by the window, and, moreover, sat there one whole hour, determined to watch for the return of the pony chaise. From his window he could see it pass behind a narrow belt of young trees, to the stables. He could see if the stable-helper, appointed to drive her, returned alone or not.

In an hour he returned, and alone.

"Then she is fairly off," and Mr. Bohun got up and breathed again. "Come, Hector!" said he, "stir up, old dog. Come, and let us shake off the ugly mood that is on us. We have gone through troubles hitherto unknown to-day, Hector, and we have made two enemies. We have got to fight the world now, Hector, and our way does not lie smooth before us. Stir up briskly, my old friend, and let us face our worries in the open air. It blows away many a grievance. But we have got a skeleton in our

house, and you and I must face it. Let us take a walk together, and think over what we can do."

"William," said the old coachman to the helper that evening, "didn't I hear as how Hector was to be took down to the kennels to-night? Wasn't you to fetch him?"

"So Mrs. Ponsford said; and I went to Mr. Bohun, and he was mortal angry and dared me to."

"Then, in course, he ain't going, and you may take down that young setter of Sir Felix's, and put him in the big kennel instead."

"But didn't I ought to take Hector, too?"

"When Mr. Bohun told you not?"

"But Mrs. Ponsford said particklar——"

"Mrs. Ponsford be ——. If you go minding Mrs. Ponsford against Mr. Bohun, I'll make the place too hot to hold you. Be off with you!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THEY went away for two or three days; they remained away two months; and all that time Mr. Bohun was locked out of every room in Bohun Court, except the two appropriated to himself, and the large, dull cheerless dining-room, which he never entered. He could certainly have invited four-and-twenty friends to dine with him, had he chosen it, but he could not have asked one to stay all night. Not a bed-room was left open. Mrs. Dance announced the fact with a flood of tears, and Mr. Bohun heard it with the composure of a stoic.

But he had made up his mind to all this. Nothing surprised him now; but there was stirring within him by this time a resolution which solitude would give him firmness to put into execution. It was, no longer to reside beneath the roof that had been his home so long; and this absence of Sir Felix was the most opportune circumstance that could have befallen him, as far as his plan was concerned,

since, as long as his brother was present, he actually had not the heart to resist his entreaties that he would remain.

But now his mind was made up. The system of persecution, insult, and impertinence, all veiled under a specious garb, was no longer to be endured, and the opportunity for releasing himself had arrived.

"Mrs. Trant was right," he used often to say, as he mused by himself; "I ought never to have subjected myself to this life. I ought to have retired with dignity a year ago, just as Mrs. Dance ~~has been wishing I was a fool,~~ and treated Mrs. Trant's hints and innuendos with carelessness—consequently, my punishment has overtaken me. But it is over now. It is not compulsory that I should live with a skeleton in my cupboard; henceforth I will have a cupboard to myself." And armed with this resolution, he put on his hat, took Hector by the ear, and prepared to walk down to Mrs. Trant's cottage, and communicate it to her.

It had been so long the custom of the Bohuns to tell Mrs. Trant all their thoughts, actions, and intentions, that he did this as a matter of course; but, as he took his way through the plantations, in crossing the high road, he encountered Mr. Melville, and then recollected that he had not seen him for several days.

"My dear friend, what have you been doing with yourself?"

"I have been in town," said the old clergyman, "and was summoned up on business so hastily, that I had not time to ask if you had any commands. But I saw Sir Felix."

"Did you?" replied Mr. Bohun; "I daresay I shall see him myself before long, for I have some idea of going up in a day or two."

"I am glad of it," returned Mr. Melville so pointedly that Mr. Bohun's keen eyes fixed themselves rather steadily on him; "I am glad of it, because I saw no prospect of their coming down here, though a London life evidently does not agree with Sir Felix."

Now Mr. Bohun and his brother were in frequent, nay, constant correspondence with each other. Not three days passed without the interchange of letters, and the former

was aware that Sir Felix had not derived that benefit from the change which he had expected, nor which the scraps invariably added by Lady Bohun to the letters, wished to lead him to infer. But this kind of correspondence was not satisfactory. It was not the voluntary outpourings of an unwatched pen. It was epistolization under the restraint of continual supervision.

The letters were not those of Sir Felix. They all bore traces of Lady Bohun. Consequently, Mr. Bohun never felt sure that he had the right version of either his brother's when his old friend ~~proceeds~~ was quite ready to take alarm was going up to town.

"Then my brother was not looking well?" was his first question.

"Very far from well, and out of spirits."

"Is it possible? Lady Bohun describes their life as a whirl of gaiety."

"Lady Bohun goes out a great deal, I believe: but not Sir Felix: that is, not when he can help it. I was to have dined with him one day *tête-à-tête*, Lady Bohun being engaged to go out to her father's near London, but on her return home from her afternoon's drive, she positively insisted on his accompanying her, and made me a great many very polite apologies, begging me to fix another day, which, however, I was unable to do."

How like her was even this little circumstance! how like the jealousy which marked every action of her life! but Mr. Melville did not appear to have seen it in this light. To him it only seemed a little piece of tyranny, strongly savouring of selfishness.

"I was in hopes," began Mr. Bohun again, "that they would soon be thinking of home. Bohun Court looks so beautiful just now."

"Ah! my dear Mr. Bohun, the young lady sees more beauty in London at the present season, I fancy; and Sir Felix is under advice."

"That makes me uneasy. My brother has hardly ever had a doctor in his life. Does he look ill?"

"There is a look about him I do not like."

"So there was before he left home."

"True; and it has gained upon him. He is not what

he was; but as, perhaps, you know, he suffers from a numbness in the limbs, and I had hardly a moment alone with him, owing to the presence of a servant, who was rubbing his feet during the greater part of my visit."

"This is something quite new to me!" exclaimed Mr. Bohun, anxiously. "Neither my brother nor Lady Bohun have ever hinted at such a thing. A numbness? Good heavens! that looks like paralysis!"

"Let us hope not; but, as I told you, I had no opportunity to speak privately with him as to his health."

"Owing to the presence of the man-servant?"

"Not a man, my dear friend—Lady Bohun's own maid—apparently, a very valuable servant, who never leaves him when her mistress is out."

"Ponsford, by Jove!" almost burst from Mr. Bohun's lips, but, drawing them in tightly, he refrained. Ponsford, the vampire! the skeleton in the cupboard! Ponsford mounting guard over the invalid to the exclusion of his friends!

"A villainous plot, to gain some end, at present a mystery," thought Mr. Bohun, and hastily bidding his friend adieu, he pursued his way to Mrs. Trant's, determined that two days more should find him by his brother's side—and no Ponsford to play third hand.

"You are right," said Mrs. Trant, when, after an hour's conversation, she had learnt all his plans; "you have come to a right decision, and I only wish you could have arrived at it before your reluctance to disoblige Sir Felix had brought down so much annoyance upon you. But the oldest of us sometimes have to learn by experience, and you have bought yours dearly. When do you go?"

"I shall go to-morrow. I was in no haste until I met Mr. Melville, but now I am uneasy; uneasy at his account of my brother's health, and uneasy at the ignorance in which I have been kept. Fortunately, I am not sufficiently afraid of Lady Bohun to hesitate to demand the reason of so much concealment. All the petty annoyances to which I have been subjected appear trifles in my sight now in comparison with this. Who has a better right to know of my brother's indisposition than myself?"

"His wife," said Mrs. Trant, quietly; "take care how

you encroach on what she considers her property and prerogative. Unless I am much mistaken, she will submit to no interference where Sir Felix is concerned."

"Despicable jealousy!" exclaimed Mr. Bohun, getting up, and walking about the room.

"Wives don't like family interference," persisted the old lady.

"Can she call my affection and interest interference?" asked Mr. Bohun.

"Go up to town and see," was the reply, "and when you come back, tell me who is right; but be temperate, dear Mr. Guy! Do you know, that I almost think mature age is bringing sourness to your spirit?"

"It is!" he exclaimed, heartily; "as ever, you are right. I am soured! soured by reading a most unamiable page of life, and rendered bitter by becoming acquainted with human nature in an unpleasant form. I acknowledge it with regret; but my temper is being spoilt. Mrs. Trant, it is high time that I should live alone again. It does not do to try and make a family man of an old bachelor."

"I say nothing to that," said Mrs. Trant, "but to your having a roof of your own, I cordially assent. As to your temper, few people live to your time of life having had so little to try them. The consequence is, when you are tried, you are found wanting."

"I like your truths, dear old friend," was Mr. Bohun's frank rejoinder, as he prepared to take his leave, "and I will endeavour to do my best to keep the peace during my sojourn in town; but I go prepared for a struggle—a struggle with both Sir Felix and my lady; the one will try to hold me fast, the other will do her utmost to shake me off."

"And she will succeed," said Mrs. Trant.

"I know it," was the answer; and the next day Mr. Bohun went up to town.

Sir Felix had taken a house for the season, in a fashionable square. When Mr. Bohun, in a cab, drove up to the door, two footmen, strangers to him, were lounging at the door, and Lady Bohun's carriage was waiting at a little distance.

"Is Sir Felix at home?" he asked instinctively.

"Not at home, sir," came immediately.

"I shall come in all the same," said Mr. Bohun, coolly, "and be so good as to bring in my bag."

"Who can it be?" whispered one man to the other, and by this time Mr. Bohun was in the hall. Hardly had he advanced to the dining-room door than it opened, and he met Lady Bohun face to face.

"Good gracious, Mr. Bohun! how you startled me!"

"How is my brother, Lady Bohun?"

"Sir Felix! Oh! dear, very well, thank you, that is, pretty well considering; but don't stand here in the hall. Come up into the drawing-room."

"My brother is out, I hear."

"Did they say not at home? Ah! that was because we were just going out to take a drive. Come up, Mr. Bohun," and he followed her into the drawing-room expecting to find Sir Felix there; but no such thing.

"Sit down, Mr. Bohun; pretty house, is it not? and when did you come up to town?"

"I have this moment arrived."

"London is very full. It will bewilder you after Bohun Court."

"If Felix is at home, will you be kind enough to say in what room I shall find him, for I do not like detaining you from your drive?"

"Oh! we were both going out. We always hunt in couples; but you wait here a moment, and I will go and tell him."

Taken off his guard, Mr. Bohun suffered himself to be left in the drawing-room, and Lady Bohun went forthwith up to her room—not down to Sir Felix. "Ponsford," said she, in a breathless whisper, "Mr. Bohun has arrived. Now, listen; go down and rub Sir Felix till I come and release you. Then get ready the spare beds for mamma and Fanny Washington. I shall drive out to The Laurels, and bring them both back, and Mr. Aylmer with them; so get all the spare rooms ready. I am not going to have Mr. Bohun *here*. You understand—not another bed by any possibility to be made up; and if, by chance, I have to go without Sir Felix, don't you leave him if you can help it."

"And if I cannot help it, my lady?"

"Why, then, manage the best way you can. No private conversations, you know."

"No, my lady."

And away flew Euphemia, having scarcely left Mr. Bohun five minutes.

She found him pacing the drawing-room impatiently, and saw at a glance that his ire was rising.

"Now come and see Sir Felix," said she, with a cheerfulness which irritated him still more. "He seldom honours this room—he prefers a luxurious little boudoir that we have downstairs."

"I am sorry you thought it necessary to take the trouble of preparing him to see *me*," said Mr. Bohun, following her moodily; "I hope his state of health requires no such precaution as *that*."

"Oh, dear no!"—and she tripped lightly down before him—"on the contrary, your arrival will be a charming surprise to him; only you know he has not been very strong for some weeks past, so I generally announce any little pieces of news to him myself, for fear of his being startled. Not that I have done so on the present occasion; I have only ascertained that he is not taking a nap, which he sometimes does after a fit of pain. This is his room," and Mr. Bohun suddenly found himself behind the chair of his brother, who, unaware of his entrance, was submitting to having his feet rubbed by an individual whose lambent eyes gleamed full upon Mr. Bohun, as he stood there, uncertain and perplexed.

"Dear Sir Felix, how is the pain?" asked the honeyed tongue.

"Oh, my dearest! really quite well. I have been assuring Ponsford so, only I cannot induce her to believe me. I feel perfectly able to walk to the carriage. Did you say I was to drive, Ponsford?"

"Oh, yes! Sir Felix, if you please."

"But first, dear Sir Felix, I have such a pleasant surprise for you. I have brought you a visitor," said Euphemia.

"Oh, Euphemia! I really cannot talk to Mr. Aylmer again to-day. His spirits are so overpowering."

"Not Mr. Aylmer—somebody else;" and, standing on one side, Lady Bohun held out her hand to Mr. Bohun, who, an amazed spectator of a scene which made his

brother appear in the light of a person in a state of imbecility, had stood mute, until now brought forward.

The change in the countenance of Sir Felix, when he saw his brother, was something marvellous. It was as if light irradiated every feature; and though his feet were apparently held fast by Ponsford, he turned himself in his chair, and held out both his hands, with a gesture of delighted astonishment,

"Of all people in the world, my good Guy! Why, this is new life to me! When did you come, and what powerful motive, stronger than all my entreaties, has brought you up?"

"Have you ever entreated me? Surely not! If you had, I should have been here before."

"Entreated you in every letter. Euphemia is my witness, as well as my amanuensis; these flying pains have made my hands very helpless lately, but she has repeatedly tried to tempt you up." Mr. Bohun glanced at Lady Bohun, but she was tying on her veil at the glass. "However, now I have got you here, Guy, I shall not let you go in a hurry—here, sit down. Thank you Ponsford, I will not trouble you any longer. Euphemia, my dear, you will excuse my accompanying you to-day."

"Oh, dear Sir Felix! Mr. Bohun will not permit you to lose your drive, I am sure."

"Then he must go with us. Guy, where is your luggage? have they taken it upstairs? Ponsford, will you be good enough to see it taken to Mr. Bohun's room?"

Ponsford looked pleadingly from Sir Felix to Lady Bohun, and then back again.

"The rooms, Sir Felix—unfortunately—the rooms are every one full."

"Yes, dear Sir Felix, how very unlucky! Don't you recollect? Mamma, and Miss Washington, and Mr. Aylmer—don't you remember?—we engaged to go and bring them all here to-day."

"I don't recollect a word about it!" exclaimed Sir Felix; "but, at all events, a room must be found."

"Not to put you to inconvenience," began Mr. Bohun, fixing his eyes on Lady Bohun.

"Pshaw, my dear fellow! inconvenience in a house that makes up two-and-twenty beds?"

"Mamma shall be put off, if you wish it," said Lady Bohun; "I dare say she will not much mind."

"Nor for the world," returned her brother-in-law; "for, to tell you the truth, my arrangements are all made. But now about yourself, Felix. I was not prepared to find you an invalid. How is it you never told me of your illness? Have you *had* an illness?"

"He has been ailing a little—nothing very serious, I am thankful to say," said Lady Bohun, patting Sir Felix on the head like a child; "and hoping that every day would bring an amendment, we have not liked to make you uneasy, Mr. Bohun, knowing your anxious temperament."

Mr. Bohun had never heard of this ingredient in his composition before, and no one possessed of less perfect self-control and equanimity would have borne it so well. As it was, nothing but that peculiar pinch about his mouth betrayed what was passing within his mind.

"Who is your medical man?" was his next question.

"Dr. J——, a most able, eminent man," said Lady Bohun.

"The greatest ruffian I ever encountered," exclaimed Sir Felix in the same breath; "so much so, that I begged Mrs. Blackstone never to bring the fellow here again."

"Not a doctor of your own selection, then," said his brother boldly.

"Dear Sir Felix," interrupted his wife, before he could reply, "Mr. Bohun will forgive me, but indeed the beauty of the day is passing. We shall see him at dinner, of course, but I am sure he will join his entreaties to mine that you should take your usual drive."

Mr. Bohun never uttered a syllable.

"Usual drive!" echoed the invalid, fractionally; "good heavens! haven't I been tied to this chair since——"

Lady Bohun and Ponsford exchanged lightning glances, and before the sentence could be finished, the latter said very calmly, but rapidly—

"Dr. J—— was to come to-day, at three, Sir Felix, and it only wants ten minutes."

Up started the victim. "Then, my dear Guy, good-bye, till dinner, for I'll cheat the fellow. Here, give me your arm—forgive me, Guy, but I cannot stand that man—no one else could have induced me to leave you, but be

sure I find you here when I come home. I have volumes to talk to you about, and I only grieve that you are not to be under this roof—my home and yours should always be one.”

And chattering on, with his arm through Mr. Bohun's, and his hand on his wife's shoulder, Sir Felix passed through the hall, tottering, feeble, and infirm—was almost lifted into the carriage—and, waiving his hand to his brother, was speedily driven out of sight, whilst Mr. Bohun stood on the steps, and heard the ostentatious order of Lady Bohun given, “to The Laurels.”

CHAPTER XIX.

MR. BOHUN turned on the step and re-entered the house, absently retracing his steps to the room in which he had had this interview with his brother.

“I may as well wait till this doctor comes, and learn the truth at once,” mused he. “It wants but a quarter of an hour to the time. I will wait.”

And he sat down, lost in thought. He had had a shock, and he wanted time to rally from it. It was a shock to have seen Sir Felix in that state. Two months had done the work of two years; and, to Mr. Bohun's eyes, his brother seemed either recovering from, or on the verge of a stroke of paralysis—not on paralysis of the limbs, but extending to the brain, for surely no one, in his rational or reasonable senses, would submit to such coaxing and cajoling as that to which he had just been an astonished and disgusted witness.

There had been a wide march in the manner of both Lady Bohun and Ponsford towards Sir Felix since Mr. Bohun had last seen them all together. The manner of the former was coaxing and fawning, as though for some hidden purpose: the manner of the latter a sort of smiling, but determined command, as though she knew and felt her

power over him. At Bohun Court there was nothing like this. Neither would have dared in those days, (and yet how few the days were ago,) to have assumed such a tone towards Sir Felix Bohun!

"He has had a stroke, or a touch very nearly approaching it, and for their own purposes I have been kept in ignorance," mused Mr. Bohun; "but I will not be baffled; I will wait and see the doctor, and fathom the truth before I leave the house, and this evening, alone with Felix, I shall be able to judge to what extent the mischief or the malady has gone."

To Mr. Bohun it had at first seemed very sudden, this complete change in his brother, but now that he came to think it over, he recollected how ailing he had been during the early months of the year—how often depressed and out of spirits—how often looking ill without any positive complaint.

"And I passed it all by, thinking Felix never could be ill."

Such was the sort of reproach with which all Mr. Bohun's mental cogitations ended.

"But *they* saw he was ill," he continued to himself; "they saw and knew more than I, and took their measures accordingly, blinding me at the time, blinding me to the last, and wishing to blind me even now, in defiance of the evidence of my own senses. But never mind. To-night, alone with him, I shall come at the true state of things, and a few words with his doctor will set me all right."

And again looking at the clock he saw the hands on the stroke of three.

Medical men are punctual. Mr. Bohun, therefore, was not impatient, but he was not suffered to remain long in solitary expectation. The old butler had only heard of his arrival as the carriage drove away, but instantly arming himself with a tray of wine and biscuits, he hurried up as fast as his ancient legs could carry him, and, bustling into the room, poured out his congratulations simultaneously with the best sherry the cellars boasted.

His greetings occupied but few sentences; the subject uppermost in his mind was the same which engrossed Mr. Bohun.

"Dear heart, sir, did you ever see such a change as in Sir Felix!" uttered more as an exclamation admitting of no doubt, than as a question.

"Burley, I am shocked," was all Mr. Bohun answered.

"I knew you would be, sir. I've had more than half a mind for many a day to make bold and write you a letter, and tell you how things was going on, and how Sir Felix was failing like, and how he was worreted and fidgeted, what with the doctors and the friends, and the relations, and the strange gentlemen what I takes to be——" the old man sunk his voice to a whisper, and backing to the door, closed it; "what I takes to be lawyers, though, thinks I, Sir Felix isn't fit for business, and it's Mr. Bohun as should come and do it for him, and says I, every day to myself, I'll make free and write."

"Oh, why did you not?" exclaimed Mr. Bohun, whose countenance had assumed a new and startled expression during the delivery of this sentence; "I knew nothing of all this! You should indeed have written."

"I would, sir, but how could I, when day after day I hears my lady promise to do it, and I puts her letters in the post myself to make sure you should get them, and every day I thinks to myself, he'll come to-day, sure enough—but no!"

"Many a letter have I had, but not one to bid me come to town," said Mr. Bohun, and then he was sorry he had said so much, for old Burley caught at the words.

"You don't mean it, sir! bless you, then you don't know half we've gone through. Oh! sir, Mrs. Ponsford——she's at the bottom of everything. She rules Sir Felix, and my lady daren't say her soul's her own for her, though I don't believe my lady feels it as Sir Felix does. My lady thinks all Mrs. Ponsford says and does is perfection, but poor master——"

The old man sighed, and Mr. Bohun, afraid to trust himself to speak, merely looked interrogatively at him.

"Poor master tried hard for his own way, at first, sir, but he had such a lot about him."

"How do you mean, a lot?"

"All my lady's—but, sir, I'd better hold my tongue—you'll see, you'll see, sir. Of course, you stay in the house, sir?"

"No, Burley. I prefer my own rooms where I always go in town. I'm growing old enough to like independence."

"Oh! sir, it's a blessed word! a word we don't know much of *here*."

"But it is the health of my brother that causes me most anxiety," said Mr. Bohun. "I do not like to see him in this state, Burley. How long has he been so?"

"Only really bad this last three weeks, sir."

"Three weeks! Good heavens! so long! Was he taken suddenly ill?"

"Can't say, sir. Everything upstairs is kept so snug, only I notices little things. There was two bottles of brandy went up one day in particular, and the new doctor came, what Mrs. Washington brought."

"Who is Mrs. Washington?"

"My lady's great friend, sir."

"By the bye, why does not the doctor arrive? I am waiting for him. He was to be here at three."

"Was he, sir?"

"Was he not?"

"Not to my knowledge, sir."

"Ponsford said so."

"Did she, sir? Then perhaps she said so to make Sir Felix go out. I've heard her do it before; it was one day that Mr. Melville was calling, sir, and poor master wanted to stay at home and have a talk with him, only my lady said he must take his drive for his health, and he is so mortal afraid of that doctor, sir, that he'd run—even from you, sir!—to get out of seeing him."

Mr. Bohun could put "two and two together," as well as anybody else. This conversation enlightened him on several points, and seeing now that to wait for an individual who was evidently not coming, or expected, would be rather like a loss of time, he turned towards the door, and ordered a cab to convey him to his own quarters.

He was no longer in a humour to talk. He could not have talked any longer, even on the subject nearest his heart, so full was it now of grief, vexation, and perplexity.

He saw the plot that was laid, and the game that was being played. The same power which had prevented a *tête-à-tête* between Sir Felix and his old friend Mr. Melville,

had that day been successfully exerted to prevent any private conversation between the brothers.

"The skeleton is in full play," thought Mr. Bohun; "there must be something they wish to conceal; something they are afraid of;" but his nature was far too unsuspicious to imagine what it could be.

He looked forward, however, to the evening to unravel the mystery. Between himself and Sir Felix there had never, as yet, been any secrets. Alone together after dinner, when Lady Bohun and her mother and her friend should have left the table, he depended upon learning all that he wished to know. Perhaps, even if he went half-an-hour before dinner-time, he could steal a few moments then; so he started early, and had the satisfaction of having the door opened by a footman with a frown on his face, and only one arm in his coat sleeve. His early appearance was evidently looked upon as an unwarrantable liberty.

In the drawing-room a similar reception awaited him. The housemaid was smoothing down the furniture, and putting the chairs and tables in their places.

"Has Sir Felix returned from his drive?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," said the well-known voice of the vampire, at his elbow, "some time ago. Sir Felix felt a little fatigued, and is resting on the sofa in her ladyship's room."

In safe custody evidently; so Mr. Bohun sat down and took up a book till the rustling of silks and satins, like the wings of a flight of birds, warned him it was seven o'clock, and time to begin to play company.

"This is mamma, Mr. Bohun, whom you remember, I dare say, and Mrs. Washington, who says she had the pleasure of sitting next you at our wedding breakfast. I am sorry to say my friend Fanny could not come; but——" and at this moment Sir Felix tottered in, held in the vigorous grasp of a fair young man with pendent whiskers and moustaches; "allow me to introduce my cousin, Sydney Aylmer."

The young man whose spirits Sir Felix had only that afternoon so piteously declared were too much for him. A case of the spider and the fly. Sir Felix seemed to writhe in the grasp which had fastened on him, and appeared not

to intend to let him go until it had deposited its burden in a chair.

"There you are, Sir Felix, safe and sound. Mr. Bohun, I am delighted to make your acquaintance. Come, cheer up, Sir Felix, you look quite yourself again to-day."

"Thank you, Mr. Aylmer, you are very good, and I know you mean to be very kind; but if I could only convince you how much better I could get on if you would be so obliging as to let me walk unassisted——"

"My dear Sir Felix, you know it keeps Lady Bohun in a constant state of alarm and anxiety, so you really must submit to my attentions. It is no trouble. I am charmed to be of use. What are you looking for?"

"Nothing, thank you, Mr. Aylmer."

"I am sure you were. Tell me, and let me find it. Have you dropped your handkerchief? Shall I go and ask for it?"

Sir Felix leant back in his chair, silent.

"You feel faint—here are Phemy's salts."

Sir Felix had the greatest objection to any one calling Lady Bohun by her Christian name, even a cousin.

"I thank you, Mr. Aylmer, but Lady Bohun herself would never venture to offer me salts. I have a horror of them. My dear Guy, come and take a chair by me. I have hardly seen you. The long drive quite knocked me up, so Lady Bohun insisted on my resting in her room, otherwise I quite reckoned on a chat with you; however——"

"Dinner, Sir Felix," said the sonorous voice of the old butler, and instantly the procession formed.

"Sydney," whispered Lady Bohun, as they went down stairs, "don't you leave Sir Felix alone with Mr. Bohun after dinner. He will talk him to death."

The consequence was, that Mr. Aylmer remained a fixture in the dining-room until, worn to a thread-paper by his ceaseless conversation, rapid and frivolous, yet vociferously demanding attention, Sir Felix begged his brother to assist him upstairs, and gave up all idea of a *tête-a-tête* as a hopeless case.

At last, Mr. Bohun managed to edge in a word *sotto voce*.

"Felix, who is that young man?"

"A standing dish, of which I would give anybody fifty pounds to rid me. The fellow cannot take a hint, and is the most intolerable annoyance to me."

"A cousin of Lady Bohun's?"

"Yes; on leave of absence from his regiment. I believe his colonel has forgotten his existence, for the leave seems interminable. He makes this house his home in the coolest way I ever saw, and has at this moment possession of the room that ought to be yours."

Two other couples had fallen into *sotto voce* conversations in other parts of the room; Mrs. Blackstone and Mrs. Washington ~~being~~ ^{noting} that the artificial flowers in their respective caps touched, and Lady Bohun and Captain Aylmer pretending to play at draughts, this being the only game the fair Euphemia professed, and certainly one eminently suited to the abilities and capacity of her companion.

"So that is Mr. Bohun?" said Mrs. Washington. "I recollect him now. He sat by me at Phemy's wedding. My dear friend, I had no idea he lived in the house."

"In what house?" asked Mrs. Blackstone, whose hearing was very imperfect.

"Bohun Court, my dear. I found out at dinner that that is his regular home. How does Phemy like that?"

"Oh! delighted."

"That's very amiable of her. I don't think it is a good plan, and Mr. B. looks to me like a man of great determination. If I were Phemy, I would not continue it, particularly in Sir Felix's state."

"Oh! he has nothing whatever to do with the estate. He had at first, but Phemy has gradually taken it out of his hands."

"And very right of her, too; not that that was what I said; but it doesn't signify. What I meant was, that there being no heir, and in Sir Felix's state of health—you understand me, my dear—a brother of that firm temper (for I can see it in his mouth and chin) may get rather too large a slice, eh?"

"A slice of what?" asked Mrs. Blackstone, getting sleepy.

"Loaves and fishes, my dear."

"No fishing at all, I believe, but I'll ask Phemy. I have never been down there yet, but we accompany her on her return, I think."

"I'm glad to hear it. A young thing like that wants a mother's eye to look after her interests, &c.—you understand me, my dear—and there is another point I wanted to talk over with you—that maid of hers——"

"That Bohun Court may be hers?" said Mrs. Blackstone trying hard to keep awake and answer coherently. "Oh! there is not the slightest shadow of a doubt as to Bohun Court being Phemy's, at all events for her life, if anything happens to Sir Felix, poor dear——"

~~That is not what I said. I spoke of that maid of hers,~~
Ponsford, who seems to me to have gained a very undue influence over Phemy. Phemy spoils her, and the woman is gaining a dangerous ascendancy. Don't you see it?"

"See what? No, I see nothing particular; I beg pardon, my dear friend, but Sydney does laugh so loud——what was there to see? Are they not playing at draughts?"

"I'm talking of Ponsford," persisted Mrs. Washington, in an offended whisper, "Phemy's maid—but you are going to sleep, my dear."

"Indeed, I am not," retorted Mrs. Blackstone, angrily; "I was merely closing my eyes. What of Ponsford?"

But at this moment Mrs. Washington saw that her conversation had attracted the attention of both Phemy and Mr. Bohun, so she wisely discontinued it, and went and sat down by Sir Felix.

"Phemy," whispered Captain Aylmer, as he pondered gravely over the moves of his game, "I would do a good deal to oblige you, but don't set me down again to play third person after dinner with Sir Felix and his brother. Mr. Bohun looked ready to eat me all the time I was left unprotected there by you in charge of your husband; and as for Sir Felix, never did man breathe such broad hints to get me out of the room, yet I remained firm to my post."

"Good boy. To-morrow I will ask somebody else to relieve you; but till I do, I cannot let you off."

"You don't like Mr.——eh?"

"Can't *endure*——"

"Skeleton in the cupboard, eh?"

"Hush!—don't let Mrs. Washington hear that, or else——"

"Phemy, my dear," exclaimed Sir Felix, suddenly, "Guy's going. Have we any engagements for to-morrow?"

"It depends on how you are, dear Sir Felix."

"Then, Guy, come early, and we can settle our plans when the morrow arrives."

And thus closed the first evening.

CHAPTER XX.

DAY after day passed, till the days numbered a week, and the system displayed on the first evening of Mr. Bohun's arrival in town, was so strictly followed up, that on looking back, he found to his surprise that, without being in the least able to account for it, he had been entirely unable during the whole of that time to have a single hour's private conversation with his brother, or indeed ever to find himself alone with him for more than five minutes.

Yet this did not seem done on purpose. He could not declare that it was intentional. If it were so, it was so cleverly arranged that it left him no power to complain, inasmuch as he could never decidedly say he was denied an audience in private.

He went to the house early. Lady Bohun, like an exemplary wife, would be reading the newspaper to her husband. He waited patiently till that was over, and her ladyship would say, "There, now I shall leave you for a gossip." Before he had time to enter fully upon the interest of any subject, Ponsford would glide in.

"If you please, Sir Felix, would it be convenient for me to rub your feet now? This is just a moment that her ladyship can spare me."

The rubbing was a great interruption, and sometimes appeared a vexatious one to the invalid; but still it certainly

was a great relief to him, so it was submitted to, and Mr. Bohun had to draw in again. Sir Felix spoke very openly before Pousford. He went running on, on matters of business, in a manner which surprised his brother; but Mr. Bohun could not bring himself to do this, consequently, all this was lost time to him, and he would make up his mind to wait till her hour of attendance had expired.

No sooner did she leave the room, and he thought to be quiet, than the door re-opened.

"Luncheon, Sir Felix," and in tripped Lady Bohun, to give her husband a dutiful arm; saying, as she did so, "What a pleasure to you, dear Sir Felix, to have such a nice companion all the morning. How good of Mr. Bohun, for he tells me he came up to town on business. We must not take up all his time though, must we?"

At luncheon, friends, or father, or mother, or cousin, would be sure to drop in, and extend the meal to the length of a dinner party. Then Sir Felix would go exhausted to his own room, and Lady Bohun would whisper to her brother-in-law,

"Let him rest—sometimes he dozes—he is ordered not to talk after his meals. Would you like to sit with him, or shall I? I generally work by his side without opening my lips. Would you like a book?"

Yes. Mr. Bohun would take a book, and sure enough Sir Felix *would* go to sleep, and then came the door again.

"Carriage at the door, Sir Felix. My lady quite ready," she having taken about ten minutes only to adorn herself.

Then Mr. Bohun would go out driving with them. Lady Bohun by his side, Mrs. Blackstone and Sir Felix opposite to them; and they would take a long drive up to Hampstead, or round by Willesden, and Sir Felix would come home in another state of exhaustion; and then, as they helped him out of the carriage, he would say, "I am not strong, Guy," and Lady Bohun, with a pretty air of sadness, would say, "You see how weak he is, but don't be alarmed, he will rally by dinner time."

At dinner, people joined the table every day—either one or two strangers, gentlemen, being invariably invited, "just to break the family party," Lady Bohun would say. And then the evening ended as the first had done. Day after day, always the same. Sir Felix was never alone, and yet

how could Mr. Bohun complain?—he could not. What had he to complain of?—nothing tangible. Could he boldly desire a private conversation with his brother—no, not with a devoted wife who took every opportunity of insinuating that she and Sir Felix had but one thought, and one heart, and one mind.

Yet all he wished to say was very little. Why did he make such a mountain of his molehill? It was merely to inform his brother that he had resolved that henceforth their homes should be separate; yet he shrank from communicating this information in presence of a third person. Why?—because of the opposition the determination might meet? No!—but because he dreaded the ready acquiescence! He dreaded the sparkle of Lady Bohun's eye, and the insincerity of her silvery-toned regrets. He dreaded the facilities she would place in furtherance of his plans, and the insurmountable, yet almost imperceptible, obstacles she would raise, should Sir Felix, for once in a way, rouse up like an outraged lion, and implore his brother still to remain under the roof which had sheltered both equally from childhood.

The anger or the sorrow of Sir Felix would be easier to bear than the ill-concealed triumph of Lady Bohun. Yet, mortifying as it would be, he must go through it. He must hear the regrets, and pretend to believe them; he must see the triumph, and pretend to be blind!

"Mrs. Trant was right," thought he to himself one day; "she has shaken me off, and yet it has been without a struggle. I came to town prepared to think the point would be contested, yet she has succeeded in her aim and end without a word, and without descending from her pedestal. Lady Bohun, you have paved the way so well, that I see I shall be permitted to resign my post without opposition. So be it."

And forthwith Mr. Bohun set about the business that had brought him up to town—the arrangement of the *pied-à-terre* which he was in future to rejoice in as his own.

In the course of this transaction, chance threw him in the way of one of the partners in the firm of Bland and Frumpton, his family solicitors. It was Mr. Bland who happened to be in the office when Mr. Bohun, passing the door, looked in to say how do you do.

Mr. Bland, gay and *débonnaire*, was always charmed to see visitors, whether clients or friends; whilst Mr. Frumpton, over head and ears in parchments, played the working bee in the most praiseworthy manner, and never uttered an unnecessary word—yet one partner had just as much to do as the other, in point of fact, but they had different ways of doing it.

Mr. Bland's delight at the apparition of one of the brothers of Bohun Court was very vociferous, and he nailed him to a chair instantly. It was so long since he had seen him, he really must detain him for a few minutes, and he kept Mr. Bohun in close conversation for two hours.

Yet the subject was sufficiently interesting to render the detention far from irksome. They talked entirely about Sir Felix, and Mr. Bohun gleaned an immense amount of information.

"When your brother first came to town, my dear sir," said Mr. Bland, in the course of his ramblings, "we saw a good deal of him—sometimes he came here, sometimes we went there—but lately, somehow, we have not been so much in his confidence. We are aware that we are not his only counsellors; we do not presume to question his perfect right to select his own advisers, but, at the same time, my dear sir, we are quite aware that he has sought legal assistance in other quarters. Of course, these things are well known amongst us—it is no affair of ours, but we know all the same. And, indeed, I expected it some time ago—ever since Sir Felix withdrew some of his papers from our charge."

Mr. Bohun was going to speak, but changed his mind and sat silent, so Mr. Bland proceeded.

"Of course, we always imagined and anticipated that from time to time Sir Felix would find it incumbent on him to make alterations in his testamentary documents, and we felt somewhat hurt at the moment that we were not to be honoured with his confidence; however, as we were saying—but, my dear sir, you look very pale—let us offer you a glass of wine?"

An unpleasant idea had flashed on Mr. Bohun all at once at this accidental disclosure; and, much to his vexation, he had actually felt himself turn pale; yet why?

He had suddenly awoke to the fact that Sir Felix had no doubt been making a new will; yet what was that to him?

Nothing—and he would have felt it as nothing had there been no mystery about it; but if indeed it were nothing to him, why all this concealment and mystery? Why had the will been withdrawn from the hands of Messrs. Bland and Frumpton? Why had strange lawyers (for now he recollected what the old butler had said about the "strange gentlemen" who had "worreted and fidgeted" Sir Felix) been called in, and such secrecy been observed? So Mr. Bohun turned pale, but he was angry with himself for doing so; angry to think that he could for one instant suspect his brother of any act which could by any possibility come under the designation of treachery, much less injury, to himself.

But still, Bohun Court was not entailed. It was in the power of Sir Felix to leave it to any mortal being he pleased. Since his marriage, little conversation had passed between the brothers, but even that little had served to set the mind of Mr. Bohun at rest as to the ultimate destination of the well-beloved home of his childhood. Sir Felix had distinctly given him to understand that, failing an heir (or an heiress), Bohun Court would revert to him. Once, indeed, he uttered some very decided words about it. They were these: "I once thought how bitterly vexed and disappointed I should be if the wife of my choice did not see Bohun Court with *our* eyes; but now, Guy, I am actually not sorry. That Euphemia has not given her heart to the old place makes my way clear before me."

There was surely no mistaking these words; at least, so Mr. Bohun thought *till now*; but now he by no means felt so sure of his ground. It seemed pretty evident that the will had been withdrawn for a purpose; that Lady Bohun was aware of the withdrawal; and that *he* was to be kept in ignorance of it, and this augured ill.

"What can she have been plotting and planning?" thought he, as Mr. Bland rattled glasses in a deep cupboard under one of his windows. "How can one so green in age have learned to be so gray in artifice?"

"By the bye," exclaimed Mr. Bland, at last emerging with a little round tray, on which was a bottle of curaçoa;

"what a very singular coincidence it is, that that extraordinary young person who was confidential servant in the family of old Lady Merivale for so many years, should have found her way back to Bohun Court again."

"Ponsford?" said Mr. Bohun, absently; "yes; but why is she extraordinary?"

"Singular woman—a *most* singular woman!" proceeded the old lawyer, pinching in his lips; "there is no female of all our acquaintance that has given us more trouble and perplexity than that Mrs. Ponsford, so singularly has she been mixed up in the affairs of many of our clients."

"Ah! you mean Lady Mary Topham and the jewel case?"

"That is one instance. Goodness me! the trouble we had with the family about those pearls! Mr. Topham swore Lady Mary never could have given them, but Mrs. Ponsford had her documents all safe and correct. No want of black and white, and then, to our infinite embarrassment, Mr. Topham declared the black and white was very unlike his wife's usual hand-writing! Bless my heart, what a breeze we had here, but there has been a worse than that since. That blew over, for what could we say against black and white? The pearls were left to the individual, and she made us a low curtsy and carried them off in triumph, and we thought we had said good-bye to her, but not she! she turned up a little while ago, on the death of Lady Merivale."

"That was a very awkward story," said Mr. Bohun, "all the world knows it; did not the wife of the second son see, through the half-open door, Ponsford holding the old lady's fingers round the pen that signed that most nefarious codicil?"

"By which the old lady left all her plate to that young doctor of hers? Yes—(to whom I verily believe Mrs. Ponsford was at the time engaged), though he wisely turned it into money soon after he came into possession, and still more wisely did *not* marry Mrs. Ponsford. But, however—what we meant by calling her extraordinary was this, that she has the faculty of obtaining over those with whom she resides, and who are worth her trouble, the most marvellous influence, we would almost venture to say, the most dangerous influence."

"You are right," said Mr. Bohun, emphatically, "I have seen it."

"So have I," returned Mr. Bland, shortly.

"Any case in point?" asked Mr. Bohun.

"Yes, she turns Lady Bohun round her finger already," answered the old man, courageously.

"I am sorry to hear it," was Mr. Bohun's grave reply.

"And, my dear sir, if that were the extent of her power we should not presume to complain—complain is hardly the word—we mean, presume to offer a word of warning, but we fear the evil will not rest here. The last time we had the honour of waiting on Sir Felix was on the occasion of the transfer of—bless me, what was it?"

Mr. Bland was a great talker; great talkers sometimes get themselves into a tangle, and are on the verge of telling secrets, and when this happened to Mr. Bland, he was sharp enough to pretend to lose the thread of his discourse, or forget the point of his story.

"I know to what you refer," said Mr. Bohun, calmly; "but what has that got to do with Mrs. Ponsford?"

"My dear sir, it was on that occasion that we saw, with regret and dread, the growing influence she was gaining over your brother. Had we not known her previous history and all about her, we might have thought nothing of it, but as it was, we certainly did think to ourselves, to use a homely phrase, the lady is at her old tricks again, for not a sentence did Sir Felix utter, but what he added, turning to her, 'Isn't that what I said I would do, Ponsford?' Oh! Mr. Bohun, my dear sir," exclaimed Mr. Bland, suddenly springing up in a startling manner, "that's a dangerous woman. Believe me, it may some day be necessary for you to be on your guard, and we take the liberty of old friendship to tell you so."

Mr. Bohun did not spend the rest of that day comfortably. Although he had a good deal of business to transact, still, as he walked hurriedly from place to place, he had time enough to think, and his thoughts were disagreeable ones.

Doubt and distrust had entered into his mind, and though it seemed like ingratitude and injustice towards his brother to doubt him, still he could not help having fears that Sir Felix, no longer his own agent, had been worked

on, during his stay in town, by influences far more powerful than his own enfeebled will, and if so, what might he not have done?

For money, Mr. Bohun cared nothing. He had enough and more of his own than he wanted, but for Bohun Court—he worshipped every tuft of moss on those ivy-covered walls! Surely, surely, it would never pass away from him?

And then wild thoughts flitted through his brain, making the sober man half delirious—she would be a gay widow, were she to become one—she was very young, and might long outlive him—he might offer to purchase the beloved place of her, and she might refuse!—and then he pulled his hat over his eyes, and hurried on, he hardly knew which way, and looked back with a groan in his heart, on the day when Sir Felix, in a weak hour, had, for the third time, placed his liberty in another's keeping.

But Guy Bohun was too high-minded to indulge long in thoughts like these: they had tortured him for the time, but that once over, he was himself again; the memory of all that he heard that day clung to him, but the bitterness of it passed, and a quiet evening spent by himself brought back sufficient tranquillity to his spirit to enable him to present himself the next morning at his brother's house without a single feeling of animosity or reproach.

What he heard, however, when he went in, surprised him.

CHAPTER XXI.

ALL going to Bohun Court? The whole family on the move, when, four-and-twenty hours previous, no such intention had been ever breathed?

“Yes, sir. Sir Felix gave the order last night, sir, and Mr. Burley went down this morning.”

It was one of the new footmen who spoke, and when Mr. Bohun heard that it was Burley who had been selected as the *avant-courier*, he at once saw that there was not the

slightest chance of his discovering the real reason of the sudden flight. Though not naturally suspicious, he was becoming so by degrees, and his present suspicion was, that the old butler had not been sent out of the way without a motive. The frequent *tites-à-tites* which the ancient domestic managed to steal, had evidently been observed and disapproved, so, in order that no truths should be told, he was sent out of the way of being asked questions.

Mr. Bohun entered the house in silence, perhaps rather a morose silence, and was roused by the voice whose unvarying cheerfulness had become quite a source of irritation to him—Mr. Aylmer's.

"How d'ye do, Mr. Bohun? Ain't we in a confusion? I'm going to have a cigar to purify the house."

"Lady Bohun is very forbearing if she permits you such an indulgence," returned Mr. Bohun, well remembering how early in her married career it was denied to *him*.

"Oh! Phemy don't mind. If she did, I don't care; I'm privileged. Are you going in to see the old gen—I beg your pardon—I mean Sir Felix?"

Mr. Bohun said nothing; but passed on towards his brother's room. Sydney Aylmer put his head into the dining-room, the lighted cigar between his fingers.

"Phemy, old Growler's gone into Sir Felix's room. He looks like thunder."

"Thank you, Sydney; go and talk till I can come."

"Impossible, Phemy—I've just lighted my pipe of consolation."

"Oh! you odious creature! then I suppose I *must*——" And she swept all the papers by which she was surrounded into her writing-table drawer. This took her several minutes, during which time Mr. Bohun sat by his brother's chair, Sir Felix looking nervously up into his face, having greeted him still more so.

"My dear Guy—alone for a moment at last! and such volumes to say," he began, in a sort of gasping way; "we are off, as you see—I could bear it no longer—that fellow Aylmer and all these confounded friends and relations—I am worn to death, and said so, and somehow, before I knew where I was, Euphemia had settled it all, and thought it best for me to go and be quiet a little——otherwise, my dear Guy, this is the very last moment

I should have chosen to leave town—just during your stay—and I wanted so much to speak to you—but follow as soon as you can—it is important—there's somebody at the door—just look."

"Does Sir Felix mind my cigar?" said a voice.

"No!—devil take his cigar and him, too. No, Mr. Aylmer, not if the door is shut. There, Guy, bang the door, never mind politeness with that insufferably cool coxcomb. Now, to business—abruptly, or we shall be sure to be interrupted."

"Be calm, Felix," said the more temperate brother, "there is no hurry."

"Yes, but there *is*," whispered Sir Felix, "much more than you think. I have something to explain to you that *must* be explained, lest you should misjudge."

"My dear Felix," interrupted Mr. Bohun, taking his brother's trembling hands within his own, "I should never do that: make your mind perfectly easy that I should never misjudge you under *any* circumstances."

"Not *me*, Guy, not misjudge *me*—I did not mean that, but misjudge those whose future happiness and comfort I have naturally very much at heart——"

"Naturally—yes—well?"

"And you must not think, my dear Guy, nor must Bland and Frumpton think, because I have not consulted them in this instance, that I have no longer the highest opinion of their talents——and——and——"

"Felix," said Mr. Bohun, gravely, "you are not accountable to any human being for your actions, and with whatever you do, I have no doubt I shall——I mean——"

It was now Mr. Bohun who stammered. He had taken his seat by Sir Felix, so strongly possessed with the idea that he was about to have the secret of alterations in the will imparted to him, that he was actually on the point of forgiving his brother for what had never been divulged!

But Sir Felix had worked himself up into such a pitch of nervous agitation, that he seemed to take no notice of any part of his brother's sentence except the words, "You are not accountable to any human being," and to these only he replied.

"True—exactly—just what I wished to explain, that I abhor tyranny, influence, and all that sort of thing; I am

my own master. Certainly, I would rather have remained in town just now, but, you see, I am very far from well. Ponsford begins to understand my constitution——”

Mr. Bohun drew in a deep breath.

“Oh!” continued Sir Felix, misunderstanding its import, “there really is nothing serious the matter with me, only constant change of air and scene seems requisite, and though your visit up to town happens most unfortunately, still——”

The door opened, and Lady Bohun, radiant, as usual, looked in.

“Ah! Mr. Bohun! Dear Sir Felix, I want Mr. Bohun here a moment, just to give an opinion on my alabaster group——”

She took him into the hall, “——a little pious fraud of mine, Mr. Bohun; but I want to tell you of our sudden departure. We are always obliged to take Sir Felix when the spirit moves him; if we did not, we could do nothing, he is so painfully nervous. Therefore, if you please, not a word to deter him; he is quite charmed at the idea of seeing Bohun Court again, and so am I” (“news,” thought Mr. Bohun); “but now I must go back to him; come in, and we hope, dear Sir Felix, don’t we? that your brother will follow us as soon as ever it is agreeable to him.”

“Thanks for the permission,” again thought Mr. Bohun. But she was at her post again, and the interview was over; the opportunity had come, and was gone; and now she sat, holding the hand of Sir Felix, and looking earnestly in his face. A dew of perspiration certainly did stand on his forehead.

“You have been agitating yourself,” said she; “you look quite upset, dear Sir Felix. You must have a glass of port wine instantly. No?—then it must be your tonic—yes, your tonic, dearest Sir Felix, if you love me! there’s a dear good patient! Please, Mr. Bohun, ring the bell—twice—many thanks. Twice means for Ponsford; she knows our quantity.”

The opportunity was over indeed, and what could Mr. Bohun do? What had he done? What was he doing? Sitting there like a mummy, seeing his brother treated like a child, and powerless to act, for was this a moment to announce to that trembling man a piece of intelligence

which, even in his days of health, he always met with almost angry opposition?

"I must write it," thought Mr. Bohun, and thus he resigned himself to the circumstances of the moment.

And how had it all been arranged! To explain it, we must go back a day.

The morning spent by Mr. Bohun in the office of Messrs. Bland and Frumpton, was one destined by Euphemia to be passed at the Crystal Palace. She had made up a party, consisting of all her most agreeable intimates, and had arranged that they should all dine there, Sir Felix should be wheeled about in a bath chair (which he detested), that she should enjoy her usual noisy flirtation with Mr. Aylmer, and that in the cool of the evening all should drive home to a late supper, Sir Felix being consigned to his bed before that part of the entertainment commenced.

Mr. Bohun had been invited, but not in terms which he would have condescended to accept, even had he wished to join the party, which he did not.

"I suppose you would not care to make one of our number?" had been Lady Bohun's words; "I am not the least superstitious about thirteen at table, if you would like to join us?"

"I thank you," Mr. Bohun had replied, "but I have quite an accumulation of business on hand for that day, so you need not brave the unlucky number on *my* account."

It so happened that when the morning dawned, Ponsford asked leave to absent herself from her duties for a few hours, as soon as she had arrayed her mistress in her morning toilette. She was obliged to see a lawyer who paid her a small annuity, left as a legacy to her; she would be sure to be back by two o'clock, in time to dress her ladyship for the Crystal Palace, if she might be permitted to start early. So at ten o'clock Mrs. Ponsford, delicately attired in silver grey, with the prettiest of simple straw bonnets, and a little veil, covered with black spots, tied close over her face (making her look like a patched beauty of many reigns ago), set forth on her errand.

But instead of an absence of three hours, which Lady Bohun expected, back came the damsel in less than one.

"Why, Ponsford!" exclaimed her mistress, "your business did not take long."

"Oh! my lady, I was not able to transact it."

"No?—what a pity, after having all the trouble of going to the end of the earth and making such a *belle toilette*."

"Oh, my lady!"—with that passive, resigned smile of hers—"the trouble was very little, only it was vexatious. However, as it happened to be Mr. Bohun——"

Euphemia rather drew up. "Mr. Bohun what?" said she.

"Mr. Bohun was already with Mr. Bland when I arrived—I hope, my lady, I am not committing an indiscretion—of course I was not supposed to know he was there; and, of course, if he had wished his visit known, he would have mentioned it. But, perhaps, your ladyship *did* know——?"

"Not I. What could he be there about, Ponsford?"

"I have not an idea—at least, I cannot say, my lady—business, of course."

"What business, I wonder? Nothing connected with us, I am sure; for I have taken good care, and so have you, have you not? that he should not worry Sir Felix on business matters. Now what *could* he be doing at Bland's?"

Conscience may well be said to make cowards of us all. The hearts of both these fair confederates misgave them because of the simple fact of Mr. Bohun's being found in a lawyer's office.

"I met Mr. Frumpton on the stairs, my lady, and he said Mr. Bland was engaged. I said I had but little time and few opportunities; but when he mentioned that it was Mr. Bohun, and that he had already been there more than an hour, I thought I had better come home again, and just name it to your ladyship."

"How lucky! I am so glad you found it out, Ponsford; but it is very unfortunate his having gone there—very unfortunate—most provoking! and after all our pains, too, and all my anxiety."

"Mr. Bohun can do no harm, my lady," said Ponsford, in a very low voice.

"How do we know?" replied Euphemia, in the same tone.

"The new will is signed and witnessed, my lady."

"But Sir Felix may make fifty codicils?"

"Not without your knowledge, my lady, unless Mr. Bohun should have sufficient influence or opportunity to induce him to do so."

"He has influence with Sir Felix to make him do anything!" exclaimed Lady Bohun vehemently. (She did not see Ponsford's smile again, though generally it was a book to her—a book full of hints and suspicions.) "He might do incalculable mischief even now! How do I know but what he has drawn everything out of that old chatter-box, Burley, and formed his resolutions accordingly? Ponsford, we are in a difficulty!"

"Not the least, my lady, indeed!"

"No? I think we *are*, though, and I should be very glad if you could prove the contrary."

"My lady, no harm can be done, even now, provided Sir Felix and Mr. Bohun are prevented being alone together."

"But what a task it is to prevent that! I am sure I am sometimes at my wits' end, and Mr. Aylmer often declares he will not be continually mounting guard. As for me, I am tired out, and I dare say you are, too."

"Oh, my lady, I would do anything to serve you! Perhaps I ought not to say so, but it would have gone to my heart to have seen your ladyship left, as it were, at Mr. Bohun's mercy, if anything happened to Sir Felix."

"But, Ponsford, I don't feel safe even now! what *can* we do? If Mr. Bohun sees the new will, he will oppose it—he will terrify Sir Felix—Sir Felix will give way, and then—Oh, Ponsford! what *could* take that man to Bland and Frumpton's?"

"My lady, do not agitate yourself. I think we can avert any mischief. I mean, I think your ladyship can win the game yet."

"Oh, Ponsford! I would give anybody fifty pounds if they could just get Mr. Bohun out of the way till we go back to Bohun Court again."

Ponsford's smile returned.

"Ponsford, you have some scheme. What is it? An anonymous letter, saying Hector is poisoned?"

"My lady, I would undertake to prevent Mr. Bohun's having any private conversation with Sir Felix for much less than fifty pounds."

"Ponsford, you are a jewel, if you are in earnest. Is it a feasible plan? I declare I would give twenty pounds."

"It is quite a feasible plan if you take it in hand yourself, my lady."

"That I will with all my heart! Ponsford, what shall I give you? Choose—quick—not twenty pounds, though; I was joking! Not money—you don't care for money! Now, I tell you what—you shall have my black moiré antique, if you do it!"

"Oh, thank you, my lady! but it is your ladyship, not I."

"Well, but what is it?"

"Sir Felix was very anxious to go to Bohun Court the other day, my lady, just before Mr. Bohun came—after Mr. Melville was in town."

"I remember, so he was; well?"

"If he were to go now, my lady?"

"And leave Mr. Bohun in town? Very good. But suppose he were instantly to follow us?"

"He will not yet, my lady, if at all."

"Ponsford?"

"Perhaps I am betraying a confidence; but from you, my lady, somehow I feel as if I could conceal nothing. Mr. Bohun has taken, or has almost taken, some chambers at the Albany, kept by a relation of mine."

Euphemia clasped her hands in speechless delight.

"He would not be likely to leave town at this moment, therefore, my lady; and if you could persuade Sir Felix to start directly——"

"It shall be done, Ponsford—we could go to-morrow even, if you could go down by this evening's train."

"Would it not be better to send Mr. Burley, my lady? to get *him* out of the way, my lady?"

"Burley? I don't know how we could spare him. Sir Felix might not like it."

"If Mr. Burley is here when Mr. Bohun calls again——" insinuated Ponsford.

"I see, I see," cried Euphemia; "you are quite right; it shall be Burley, and I will settle it all with Sir Felix myself."

So Lady Bohun dressed for the Crystal Palace, expatiated on the beauties of nature during the whole drive to

Sydenham, spoke to Sir Felix incessantly of the loveliness of Bohun Court in summer—wished she were there at that moment to see it, and ended, by having it all her own way.

CHAPTER XXII.

"I must write it," thought Mr. Bohun, and he resigned himself to circumstances; but it so happened that though one opportunity had escaped him, another offered itself before the end of the day.

The carriage stood at the door. It had been there ever since half-past twelve, in order that the departure should take place by the one o'clock train; but no sooner did Sir Felix realise that a long journey was before him than he declared he would not go, and it had required all Euphemia's persuasions, and Ponsford's calm determination to induce him to make up his mind that he would start by the three o'clock train instead.

He had just been prevailed upon, when Mr. Bohun arrived, and then the enfeebled mind began to vacillate again, though he felt that he could but struggle in the net, there was no escape, so in speaking of it to his brother he tried to make a virtue of the necessity, and thus rendered himself a still greater object of most painful thought and commiseration to Mr. Bohun.

However, there was no help for it (so Mr. Bohun thought), till all at once Ponsford was called from the room, and he then saw another chance, particularly as Sir Felix seemed to seize her absence to explain, in a lowered voice—

"But you will soon follow us, Guy? You will soon come back?"

"Now is the time!" thought Mr. Bohun, and turning quickly to his sister-in-law he said, "Do not let me detain you, Lady Bohun. You must have a great deal to do. I will remain with my brother."

There was something in Mr. Bohun so commanding when he chose, that Euphemia, unsupported by the indomitable Ponsford, quailed at his manner, and by her hesitation, betrayed the two kinds of alarm under which she was labouring—fear of defying him, and fear of leaving them alone—but the former predominated and gained the day. With an attempt to curl her trembling lips into a smile, and thus conceal her indignation, she sailed out of the room, and eagerly sought her attendant.

"Ponsford," she exclaimed, her eyes glittering with rage, "he has, in the politest way in the world, ordered me out of the room!"

"My lady!"

"Yes! Actually in my own house coolly begged me to leave him with Sir Felix."

"And you *did*, my lady?"

"What could I do? You don't know how he can look when he chooses. What could I do?"

"I should have remained, my lady."

"Not if you had seen the look he gave me, Ponsford."

"My lady," said the abigail, with her head erect, and an air of defiance which she now often assumed unreprieved; "I am not afraid of Mr Bohun."

The arrow went straight to the mark, and Euphemia coloured to the tips of her fingers.

"Go then," said she, "go yourself, and stand your ground if you can. I shall not enter the room again whilst that man is in it."

"What is the use of my going now?" asked Ponsford, with the sort of deferential insolence (if the contradictory term may be permitted), which had also begun of late to mark her manner to both Sir Felix and Lady Bohun; "the mischief may have been done whilst we have been talking here."

"And it also may *not* have been done," retorted Euphemia, who, when fairly roused, could condescend to combat a point even with a domestic; "so, Ponsford, you had better go and do your best. You will see in a moment if they are on matters of business, not that I believe you will stand your ground any better than I did."

Ponsford descended the staircase with a calm, deliberate step, and a fixed look of determination on her face.

There is no human being who possesses the faculty of exercising unusual influence or power over his fellow-man, who is not fully aware of it, and this knowledge gives of itself additional power.

"Felix," Mr. Bohun had begun, as the door had closed on the irate wife, "we have but a few moments to converse, so I must be very brief. I want to tell you why I came to town. I want to explain to you how very much happier I should be had I some little *pied-a-terre* to which I could retreat when the fit was on me, and with this view I——"

Sir Felix raised himself in his chair, and caught at his brother's hands—"To leave me, Guy?" he cried in a low, agitated whisper; "to leave me *now*—at such a crisis—in my state—to leave me to the tender mercies of a crowd of——of——harpies—I mean strangers—friends—relations—whatever you call them—to leave me *now*!"

He was trembling all over in a moment.

"Not to leave you, Felix, *now*," said Mr. Bohun, retracting when he saw the unexpected effect his words had produced; "but to have some certain abode in town, to which I could run up when I chose—to which you also would have equal access. I only wished to consult you on the subject before my plans became definite. All our lives we have held counsel together on subjects of mutual interest, and I will not act in this measure until I lay before you my reasons."

Sir Felix suddenly covered his eyes with his hands.

"I see, I see them clearly," he murmured; "and I can grieve, but I cannot wonder; neither can I put a spoke in the wheel, though it grind me to death."

There was an anguish in his voice which went straight to his brother's heart. It changed all his feelings, but it did not shake his resolutions. He felt he must still act, for the sake of his own dignity, but it must be done with more caution, and some secrecy. Sir Felix was evidently unequal to any agitation, and Mr. Bohun therefore modified his announcement until it took more the form of an idea, than a decision.

"Felix," said he, gently, "you must not take it in this light. You cannot imagine that I would not rather cut off my right hand than oppose any wishes you may have on the

subject; but it has sometimes occurred to me that, happily surrounded now, as you are, by new interests——”

“A—h!” said Sir Felix between his teeth, with a long-drawn sigh; and then he compressed his lips tightly, as if to prison back some sentence which might as well gnaw at his heart, instead of finding utterance for no available purpose.

“It occurred to me, my dear Felix,” continued Mr. Bohun, “that under these circumstances, you would not miss me so much were I occasionally to——”

The door opened, closed, and the steady footfall approached, and paused behind the arm-chair. Mr. Bohun fixed his eye on his brother. Sir Felix was as white as a sheet.

“If you please, Sir Felix, her ladyship begged me to tell you the carriage is at the door, and I have put in your cushions.”

“Felix,” said Mr. Bohun, his eye unflinching under a gaze which he felt to be upon him, “I have still a few words to say. We will request Mrs. Ponsford to leave the room until our conversation is concluded. You have yet abundance of time to save the train.”

Sir Felix never spoke. Ponsford never moved.

“You can leave us,” said Mr. Bohun, looking up at her. Not a muscle of her face stirred, nor did she show the least signs of any intention of obeying.

“Felix, I will take care that you do not lose the train. Will you desire your servant to leave us?”

“Yes—yes——” said Sir Felix, hurriedly; “we have not done yet. Thank you, Ponsford. Yes—we are coming directly—no hurry—thank you—you need not wait.”

“You have not too much time, Sir Felix,” persisted that calm voice, in tones of the clearest precision; “her ladyship is waiting for you in the dining-room.”

The invalid looked bewildered, and then cast a despairing glance at Mr. Bohun. The latter was now nerved to the attack. He turned full upon Ponsford. “Sir Felix will join her ladyship in good time,” said he; “for yourself, you will be so good as to leave us. I think I said so before.”

“Pardon me, Mr. Bohun; I am waiting for Sir Felix, by her ladyship’s orders.”

"Felix!" exclaimed his brother, "is this insolence to be borne? Do you permit this person such liberty and licence?"

"No, no, no!" was the querulous reply, whilst the object of discussion stood unmoved, all but smiling; "no no. Mr. Bohun has something to say to me—you had better go, Ponsford——"

"Excuse me, Sir Felix, but you must really be so good as to let me assist you."

"Must? *must*, to Sir Felix?" cried Mr. Bohun. "Mrs. Ponsford, I will thank you to recollect that that word shall never be used to my brother again in my presence. Stand aside, if you please."

She was stooping over Sir Felix; she had his hand in hers, and had drawn his arm through her own; she had half raised him from the chair; but now the powerful frame of Mr. Bohun interposed, and his triumph would have been complete, when suddenly Sir Felix looked up in her face;—what he saw there, who can tell? who can tell how, in a state of mental weakness, a single glance from some particular eye can affect us? who can tell how a look can startle? a whisper turn the blood cold? What Sir Felix saw in those strangely-cold eyes Mr. Bohun could not tell, but the effect was instantaneous and magical.

"Thank you, Guy, very, very much; but no—let her do it—thank you. We must defer what we had to say just for the present, for perhaps after all I had better go, and not keep Euphemia—it certainly makes one very nervous, running things to the last moment. I really had rather go now that I am once up."

And go he did—not on Ponsford's arm, for that Mr. Bohun effectually prevented; but he tottered out of the room and along the hall, Ponsford following closely in the rear, and certainly in the hall stood Lady Bohun, waiting, biting her lips, and watching their progress as though she would read the inmost thoughts of the whole trio.

In her hand she held a wine-glass. "Ponsford," said she, "the tonic," and the waiting-woman, gliding past with a half-uttered apology, took it from her, a few low sentences being exchanged between herself and her mistress as she did so.

"Felix," said Mr. Bohun, in a voice which only his brother could hear, "you must get rid of that woman."

The words which the invalid spoke in answer were few, but the tone in which they were uttered, and the expression of his face as he met Mr. Bohun's appealing look, haunted his brother for many a long day; he could not get its helplessness out of his head; the words were merely, "Guy, *I cannot!*" but till that moment, nothing would have induced Mr. Bohun to believe the amount of influence which she, of whom he always thought as "the vampire," had gained over her charge.

The fact was, illness had made him her charge, and therein lay her power, for she had become as necessary to his comfort, as her assistance in every kind of duty or dilemma had rendered her necessary to Lady Bohun.

"She has, indeed, begun her deadly work," thought he, as he stood on the pavement watching their last arrangements, and recalled to his mind Miss Maynard's words at Bohun Court. "She has begun; who knows where she will end? People do not seek to gain such influence as this for nothing; but I am glad I have witnessed it, for now I see my way. No separate home for me after this."

And now they were fairly settled in the carriage. Sir Felix had taken his tonic (orange juice and water), had felt sure it had given him the required strength, since Ponsford always declared he looked "himself" again, the moment he had taken it; had suffered himself to be placed on an air-pillow, which he disliked beyond everything, though Ponsford said it prevented his being jolted; had had a down one put behind his back, which (it being August) half smothered him, and was now pronounced ready.

"Good-bye, Mr. Bohun," said Euphemia, kissing her glove gracefully, "we hope to have a large, gay party at Bohun Court the week after next; you must not desert us; you will, perhaps, have transacted all your business by that time?"

"It is transacted," was his cool and startling reply, "and," he added pointedly, "I shall be at home again to-morrow."

CHAPTER XXIII.

WE hear a great deal now-a-days in musical circles, of "songs without words;" we see a great deal more in all sorts of circles, of "*looks* without words."

Mr. Bohun hardly knew the full significance of the term until he had been an eye-witness of the telegraphic purposes to which looks were put between the fair Euphemia and her trusty Ponsford.

When he delivered himself of the sentence, "I shall be at home again to-morrow," not a syllable of acknowledgment did it receive. This of itself was not flattering, but the glance of lightening which shot from one of the female occupants of the carriage to the other, was still less so, for it told of mingled anger, annoyance, and dismay. But it served one good purpose, at all events; it showed him how much his presence at Bohun Court was required, and strengthened him in his resolution not to desert his brother in the state to which he was reduced, even though it were to the cost of his own comfort and independence.

When we have cut and dried a plan which has long been agitating in our minds; when we have gathered together all the floating particles of pros and cons, and doubts, and indecisions; when we have condensed them into the mass of one magnanimous resolution,—to have them all scattered to the winds again by a sudden tempest, is bewilderment to one's senses; and so felt Mr. Bohun, as he saw the carriage drive off, watched it out of sight, and then turned "back to busy life again," *i. e.* turned to walk down to his Club, and ruminate over the events of the morning.

From the remote period of his boyhood, he did not recollect ever to have had his "angry passions" so stirred up as they had been that day. To the masters of Bohun Court the insolence of a servant was a thing unknown. Dismissal on the spot would have been the fate of any menial who had presumed to return even an answer to any order or reproof issued by Sir Felix or his brother; but the upper servants of the house being of long standing, and holding supreme authority over those beneath them, such a thing was, as I said, unknown.

No wonder, then, that Mr. Bohun's blood boiled up, hot and impetuous, at the deliberate insult offered him by a person of whose determined disposition he had had long experience—one beneath whose mysterious and irresistible influence he knew that her two former employers had quailed.

"But not I, neither shall Felix," was his inward reflection, and it was with a view of interposing himself as a protection against the chance of such a thralldom that he now resolved to give up his cherished scheme of chambers at the Albany, and first turned his steps in that direction that he might at once decline them.

In Bond Street, he encountered Mr. Blackstone. He was a good, easy, quiet man, so little like his daughter, that, fortunately, he did not remind Mr. Bohun of her, and perhaps to this fact he owed the cordiality of his reception. Mr. Bohun accosted him with all the more alacrity, since the meeting saved him a journey into the City.

"I have been looking for you everywhere, my dear sir," began Mr. Blackstone; "at your Club, and at your lodgings, and was now hurrying up to try and find you and Sir Felix together, that we might expedite matters regarding that five thousand which Sir Felix wishes to sell out."

"They are gone," said Mr. Bohun, quietly.

"Gone?" The genuine start of surprise with which the announcement was received, plainly showed how abrupt and unexpected had been this move. "Gone! are you quite sure?"

"Certain—for I saw them off. Is it possible you did not know it? Were you not at the Crystal Palace yesterday? Was it not all arranged there?"

Mr. Bohun threw out this suggestion accidentally; it was an impression he had, from the little he had been able to gather.

"Mrs. Blackstone was there, and a very large party, but I never join such gaieties. I am not so young and lissome as my daughter," said the old man, with a smile—not one of the objectionable smiles, but one of a kind, benignant, half-sad character—the smiles you often see on old people's faces. "But you surprise me, and Euphemia ought to have told me, but she is so very thoughtless. Certainly Mrs. Blackstone never said a word on the subject, or I

should have recollected, and gone to the house the first thing this morning. Dear, dear! now this is excessively provoking, for I wanted both your signature and that of Sir Felix to-day; the owner of the house happens to be in town, and when all parties are on the spot——”

“What house?” asked Mr. Bohun.

“The house they have had this spring—the house they have just left; don’t you know?”

“I know the house they have been inhabiting as residents of a season.”

“Yes; well, that is the house; its price is five thousand pounds, fixtures not included, which will run it up to a pretty penny: however, my daughter has set her heart on it, and when she does that, I know of old, to my cost, that money will not stop her, poor girl. But, as I said, people know their own affairs best—the price of it is this five thousand——”

“My dear sir,” interrupted Mr. Bohun, at last, as the garrulous old man trotted by his side, “I beg your pardon, but are you aware that you are talking to me in an unknown tongue?”

Mr. Blackstone looked up innocently.

“That I have no idea what you mean? I know Sir Felix wanted five thousand pounds sold out of the funds; he once broached the subject to me, and I understood it was to invest it to greater advantage, but, from what you say, I gather that——”

“That they want to buy that house; my daughter has set her mind on a house in town—a positive absurdity to my mind, only I never interfere in the affairs of married people—a positive absurdity for people who can give their twenty guineas a week for the season, and then shake off all responsibility and liability, and all that sort of thing; but, as I said, I never interfere, unless officially.”

“I do not like this,” said Mr. Bohun; “I do not like having a project thrust before me at the eleventh hour, and my signature demanded for the disposal of a sum of money, when I have had no time to consider whether it be a wise investment or no.”

“But, my dear sir, do you really mean you have never been consulted on the question of the house?”

“Never—though I confess I have never had five minutes

private conversation with my brother since I came to town! Did the wish for a house in town originate with him?"

"No, with Phemy—with my daughter," said Mr. Blackstone, candidly, and then a troubled look came over his face.

"I thought not with Sir Felix—his whole heart is wrapped up in Bohun Court. I cannot see why they want a house in town," mused Mr. Bohun.

And now they stood before the entrance to the Albany, and the latter turned to wish his companion good morning, for this new piece of information had by no means tended to smooth his ruffled plumes, and he felt savage with even the inoffensive being by his side. But in doing so, the troubled expression of Mr. Blackstone's face caught his eye, and he misinterpreted it.

"Do not think," said he, "that I am annoyed at what you have told me. I am only sorry they did not treat me more as one of themselves, and allow me to be taken into their counsels. However, as you say yourself, best not interfere in the affairs of married people."

"True, very true, Mr. Bohun; but it is not that that is vexing me. In the first place it is that I was not told of their intended departure. I am *sure* Mrs. Blackstone never told me, or I should not have let it escape my memory. And in the second place—I don't know whether I ought to say it—and of my Phemy, too!—"

"We will take another turn," said Mr. Bohun, for he saw that the old man had something troubling his mind which would be told more easily if he were not face to face with his companion. And he judged rightly, for no sooner had they begun to pace the pavement, than Mr. Blackstone continued,—

"I have been very uneasy lately, Mr. Bohun, though I have kept it all to myself. I don't know why I had rather trust you with the cause than my own wife, except that Mrs. Blackstone is in the habit of looking upon a peculiar feeling of mine as a monomania. I will tell you what it is. All my life long I have had the greatest dread of placing such complete confidence in any of my dependents, that I thereby invest them with a power which in time becomes an influence. I remember, Mr. Bohun, when I was young, there was an old clerk in my father's counting-house—he

had risen from having once been a domestic servant—who held my father and all our family in such a state of thralldom, that I always said to myself, from quite a boy, if ever I have servants of my own, they shall be young ones, and I will have unlimited sway over them; and, strangely enough, just before my daughter's marriage, when I heard Mrs. Blackstone and my Phemy expatiate so warmly on the merits of this Mrs. Ponsford——”

“The vampire again!” ejaculated Mr. Bohun to himself.

“And when,” continued Mr. Blackstone, “they told me, as an additional reason for taking her, that she had been *confidential* servant in her last two families, strangely enough my words in answer were those of caution to Phemy to preserve, under any circumstances, her own supremacy; and the expression I used was, No tyranny like the tyranny of a servant!”

The old man paused to take breath. Mr. Bohun was silent, and, after a moment's interval, the former continued.

“Mr. Bohun, my daughter has not done this; I see it with regret and alarm. That woman is dangerous and intriguing. I have learnt more of her than she thinks I know, and my opinion of her is bad, so much so, that I have actually taken upon myself to speak to my daughter on the subject, and all the satisfaction I have received is, Phemy's vehement assurance that Ponsford makes herself so extremely useful, that it would be utterly impossible to do without her. Now, to cut the matter short, my dear sir, the fact is this, it is the old story of my boyhood over again, and my daughter is as much under the influence of that woman as ever my father was under that of our villainous old clerk.”

“I have no doubt of it!” exclaimed Mr. Bohun, warmly, more warmly than he would have spoken had he given himself time to consider, but he was almost thinking aloud.

“Then you have seen it?” asked Mr. Blackstone, sharply.

“Yes, I confess I have.”

“You relieve me!” said the old man, seeming to breathe more freely; “if you are aware of it, a load is lifted off my mind, for I can place my child under your watchful

eye now, secure that you will not permit that woman to tyrannize over her."

Mr. Bohun smiled in his heart. The idea of the fair Euphemia's allowing herself to be placed under *his* watchful eye, when the study of her life appeared to be, how she might best elude it! But to rob the anxious old father of this little bit of flattering unction would have been cruel, so he said nothing, and Mr. Blackstone continued, confidentially,

"It is that woman, my dear sir, who has made my daughter want a house in town. I was against it, for my daughter is young, and gay, and good-looking enough, and Sir Felix is not in sufficiently robust health to go about with her, so that I hear of her flaunting here, there, and everywhere with that silly booby—I am sorry to call him so openly by his right name—my nephew, Sydney Aylmer. I don't like it, and two months of it is quite as much gaiety as is good for her; but no—I was overruled—yes, and overruled, I verily believe, by that woman, Ponsford!"

"But what object could she have in wishing to be more in town?" asked Mr. Bohun.

"A lover, I strongly suspect—a lover in ambush, for whom she is feathering her nest—a fellow who owns some chambers here in the Albany—some relation, I believe."

"Indeed!" said Mr. Bohun, an odd sort of feeling creeping over him; "and what may his name be? do you know?"

"That I don't know. Ponsford, I suppose. But not to weary you further on this subject, do you decline your sanction to this purchase?"

"Certainly not, if it's my brother's wish."

"Oh! he acquiesced, most decidedly. But are you prepared to sign the papers to-day?"

"I had rather communicate with Sir Felix first. I am going down to-morrow."

"To-morrow the owner will be gone," said Mr. Blackstone, looking blank; "and I wanted to nail him, because I have an idea that I might possibly get the fixtures thrown in, if I strike while the iron is hot."

"I cannot well get away to-day," returned Mr. Bohun; "I have several little matters to settle in town."

"Then I had better go down with the papers myself, provoking as it is," said Mr. Blackstone; "I shall then obtain the signature of Sir Felix, provided I come to terms with the owner of the house; that will be a good two hours' work. I cannot be off before six o'clock. I shall reach Bohun Court, when?"

"At nine."

"And return the first thing to-morrow, in time for your signature, without interfering with your plans of going down yourself. Thank you, my dear sir. Then all is settled. I am much annoyed with my daughter, but her thoughtlessness is incorrigible, so I wish you a very good morning, with many apologies for such an unconscionable detention."

Long before he had finished this sentence, Mr. Bohun was within the walls of the Albany.

CHAPTER XXIV.

It is not pleasant to have your lot cast amongst people who evidently consider you a nonentity, and who, moreover, take every opportunity of thrusting the fact upon your notice. In matters where really it did not concern him, Mr. Bohun treated this contempt with indifference, but in the present case it *did* happen to concern him, for the money in question could not be disposed of without his sanction and signature, and yet this had been coolly taken as a matter of course, and he had not even been consulted.

It was true it was in his power to decline, but it was not in his nature to stoop to an act of such petty revenge. No; like all the other small insults, he must "grin and bear it." He had had a long reign of exemption from the ordinary worries of the world. He supposed he must have his share, and bear them.

But his greatest grievance was giving up the cherished

hope of a home of his own. That really did completely upset his equanimity. Nothing less urgent than the wretched state in which he saw his brother sinking, could have reconciled him to the self-sacrifice; but, singularly enough, every circumstance that had occurred of late, however trivial, had tended to convince him that he was right; so, having put his hand to the plough, he would not now look back.

On arriving at the door of the chambers for which he had been in treaty, he inquired for the person he had seen on former occasions.

"He is out, sir," was the answer, "and not expected back again till the end of the week; but if you are Mr. Bohun, sir, I was told to take your orders all the same as if he were here, sir."

"I thank you," said Mr. Bohun; "but my plans are so changed, that I shall be obliged to communicate in writing. To whom shall I address my letter?"

"To Mr. Ponsford, if you please, sir, and it will be forwarded."

Mr. Bohun turned away, and drew a long breath as he emerged out of the passage into the street.

"I thought as much!" was his inward exclamation, as he hurried on; "a something told me I was on the brink of a disaster, which this actually would have been, and my escape is next to a miracle."

Meanwhile, Mr. Blackstone, on the hottest of August afternoons, was hurrying to and fro, and making all his preparations for his departure. He had to send a clerk to The Laurels to apprise his wife of the cause of his absence at dinner, for so regular was his appearance at the station every evening with his little basket of fish in his hand, that had he failed to arrive, the very coachman would have been ready to fall off the box, unless a living representative were sent to explain all about it. He had then to see the owner of the house in — Square, and beat him down about the fixtures. He had next to borrow, of another of his clerks, paraphernalia for the night; and lastly, he had to rush to the station, and reach it just in time to catch the train.

Mr. Blackstone had long retired from active business, but the old habit of going to the City, and keeping up old

friendships with the firm that still bore his name, not to mention the weakness he had for choosing his own fish, still clung to him; besides, for the Bohun family, he invariably transacted all business himself.

"But," muttered he, as he curled himself into a corner of the railway carriage, "I am too old for it—too old to be hurried about from pillar to post like this. Phemy is more thoughtless than a child. I never will do it again, even for her."

Mr. and Mrs. Blackstone had naturally had a great anxiety to see their Phemy's home. As yet, it had been always a pleasure, a very great pleasure, in prospect, and in a fortnight's time they had promised to follow her to Bohun Court in proper style, with maid and man, &c., &c. It was, therefore, no small additional vexation to the old gentleman to have to show himself to his daughter's grand establishment for the first time in all the unbecoming discomfort of a flying visit, arriving at an inconvenient hour like a thief in the night, and instead of the carriage being sent to the station to meet him with all the honours, driving up in a hired conveyance and having to announce himself, ignominiously.

Fortunately, old Burley saw the lamp flash on his face as he got out, and threw open the great doors with a wide welcome. And a wider, warmer welcome still, met him in the fine old dining-room where he found Sir Felix and his daughter sitting cozily in the twilight, for it was only just growing dark.

But even this did not compensate, and as soon as Sir Felix was wheeled off to bed, he gave the fair Euphemia a scolding.

"It was so inconsiderate of her," he said; "so thoughtless, so completely regardless of the comfort and convenience of everybody; besides which, it was a breach of the common respect which her parents had a right to expect, thus to leave London without the slightest intimation to any one of her family."

Unfortunately, Euphemia was in no humour that evening to receive a good scolding with either grace or benefit to herself. She had been, as she thought, more than usually aggravated that day, and even the quiet of a *coupé*, and the luxurious reception at Bohun Court (where, in the space of

a few hours the house had been made to look as though only left the day before), had not sufficed to smooth down her ruffled plumes. Mr. Bohun's parting words, so totally unexpected, and the elation of spirits into which they had thrown Sir Felix, as well as her own inward doubts and fears as to what could have thus induced him to change all his plans, had put Lady Bohun into a thorough ill-humour. During the half-hour, too, when she was changing her dress for dinner, Ponsford had not thrown oil upon the waters.

"What on earth could have made that man alter his mind so suddenly, Ponsford?"

"I am sure, my lady, I have no idea, unless it was something Sir Felix might have said when your ladyship left Mr. Bohun alone with him."

"Oh no! Ponsford, they could not have had time, I sent you down so immediately; did you happen to say anything about our buying that house?"

"Not a word, my lady, but——"

"But what?"

"Mr. Bohun has so long had the rule over Sir Felix, my lady, that you cannot wonder at his not intending to resign it easily."

"Not intending, indeed! I think we shall soon decide that point! and as for the rule, he has never had the rule since I came into the house, I flatter myself."

"No, my lady," returned the gentle voice; "but what a struggle it has been for your ladyship, quite embittering the peace and tranquillity of your life."

"So it has," cried Euphemia, tearing on her gloves in her own passionate way, "that man is the very plague of my existence; but, Ponsford, we will foil him yet."

"Yes, my lady" (very placidly).

"And I'll have the house full a week sooner than I intended."

"Yes, my lady."

"And this is the moment, Ponsford, for getting rid of that dog. Send him down to the kennels before Mr. Bohun comes to-morrow, for I heard his horrid howl as we drove up the avenue."

"I beg your pardon, my lady, but that is more than I

dare do. Mr. Burley would not permit the order to be executed even if I gave it."

"Very well," said Lady Bohun, outwardly calm, "then I will give it myself;" and as she went in to dinner, Burley received the order in silent submission, Sir Felix offering no opposition, as, faint and weary, he tottered into the room, leaning on her firm young arm.

Thus it was, in something like a desperate mood, that Mr. Blackstone found the lady of Bohun Court; desperate in her determination that from henceforth no soul but herself should ever have "the rule" beneath that roof. That short and hurried conversation with Ponsford was the brand that had set light to the fire and spirit with which she replied to her father's reproof, and even *he* looked rather aghast when she boldly denied the right of Mr. Bohun to know the movements of herself and Sir Felix.

"As for mamma, when I was with her at the Crystal Palace, I had not talked Sir Felix over—I mean I had not gained his consent—so, of course, I was not justified in saying anything about it, otherwise, naturally, mamma would have been the very first to know, and I should have made a point of telling her; but Mr. Bohun! my dear papa!" (and here Euphemia put on a face of childish impertinence and petulance) "what business is it of his?"

"Business, my dear? goodness! business?" Mr. Blackstone was quite shocked. "Do you mean that you are to take important steps in life, and never consult one of the chief parties concerned?"

"Mr. Bohun chief party in any of *my* affairs?" asked the lady, with the air of an empress.

"Inasmuch, my dear, as you certainly cannot buy this house, on which it seems you have set your heart, without his signature, and without his——"

"Send the papers to him," interrupted her highness, "and let him sign them."

"And without his sanction?" added her father, coolly. Euphemia's eyes flashed.

"Has he the power of refusing?" she asked.

"Most assuredly he has, my dear."

"*Has* he refused?" she exclaimed.

"No; but, my dear, what is this tone that you adopt

whilst speaking of Mr. Bohun? I don't understand it; I don't like it. What does it mean?"

"Papa, I don't choose that man to interfere in——"

"That man? Euphemia, you surprise me."

"I cannot bear his dodging us about wherever we move. There is no peace of one's life for him. I declare, as Ponsford says——"

"Ha!" interrupted her father, sharply, "that's it, is it? Ponsford—I am glad you named her. My dear, I want to have a few words with you on that subject. If Mrs. Ponsford has had the impertinent audacity to try and set you against Mr. Bohun——no, my dear, don't interrupt me, but when I have had my turn, then you shall speak—if, by some strange and inexplicable want of self-respect and dignity on your part, you have suffered a woman in her position to venture to say a word to you against Mr. Bohun, I cannot express whether I feel most disgusted with her, or displeased with yourself; but this I do know, that the sooner Sir Felix sweeps her out of the house the better, and I should be one of the very first to urge and advise him to do so. I remember when I was a boy, there was a clerk in my father's office——"

Euphemia had stood a good deal, but this was an impossibility.

"Papa, forgive me for reminding you that that story is not unknown to me, but it bears no analogy to Ponsford. Besides, we were talking of this purchase, and these law papers, and my thoughtlessness, for which, I do assure you, I am most truly sorry——"

"But, my dear Phemy, whilst once on the subject of that most dangerous influence, which chills my very blood when I think of it——"

"Dear papa, in this house no influence exists but mine, and I really believe it is because I have for once successfully exerted it in defiance of all opposition, that you are now pleased to come all the way from London on purpose to scold me!"

There was a winning way about her when she chose, and a deep artfulness in her caressing manner as she cautiously and playfully led her father away from the dangerous ground towards which he had boldly advanced a step, that insensibly whiled him from his subject; she bewildered his

ideas—she made him forget Ponsford, and overlook her tone whilst speaking of Mr. Bohun; and as these were points on which she felt herself undeniably weak, she exerted the full power of her coaxing abilities to bring the old man back to the plain fact of the purchase of the house, and immersed his thoughts in the matter-of-fact depths of £. s. d.

Possibly in this she might not have succeeded had her father had more time to spare, but he had none. Every moment was precious, and in order to conclude the bargain he had made with regard to the house in — Square, it was absolutely necessary he should be in town early the following day, certainly before the evening, but if practicable, by twelve o'clock.

But this was not practicable, or else Euphemia so managed that she put it out of the old gentleman's power, for she insisted on driving him to the station herself (armed with all his papers, duly signed, and only wanting the signature of Mr. Bohun), and saw the train move slowly off as they arrived!

"Lost it by only a minute!" she cried, throwing down the reins. Mr. Blackstone was dreadfully annoyed. "Dearest father, I really am very sorry. I am born to be the plague of your life. What can we do?"

"When is the next train?"

"Not until two o'clock."

"Time enough for the house affair, but I may miss Mr. Bohun; he was coming down to-day—he will have started."

"Then he must be stopped," exclaimed Euphemia, springing out of the carriage, "you had better telegraph; or stay, I will do it for you, papa, and then you need not have the trouble of getting out."

She was gone in a moment, and when she returned, there was a smile of exceeding satisfaction on her countenance.

"What have you said?" asked her father.

"Just the words, 'Wait until I come.' Was not that enough?"

"Quite right," said he; and she drove him back through all the lovely Bohun woods, rich in their summer splendour,

Mr. Blackstone was enchanted with everything he saw. The estate was much larger than he had had any idea of, and the manner in which the park and gardens were kept excited his warmest approbation, for he was a good judge of such matters, and looked on every bit of turf or flower-border with the eye of a connoisseur, and as he looked, sad to say, even The Laurels fell "full fathom five" in his estimation.

"With all this, my dear 'child, what in the world can you want with a house in town?" was his natural exclamation.

"Damp work here in the winter and autumn, papa."

"I never found The Laurels damp," said he.

"No, you stand so very high and dry. Bohun Court lies in a hollow, papa; and besides, now that Sir Felix is so ailing, it will be duller than ever, and I should be moped to death."

And then an idea flitted through Mr. Blackstone's mind—quite a new idea to him, but one which had already occurred to Mr. Bohun, as he sat in the window of his club, ruminating over his conversation with the old man after he had parted from him.

It was, that very likely Sir Felix, feeling himself ill, and growing weaker every day, and seeing no prospect of Bohun Court descending to heirs in a direct line, had wished to purchase this house in town as a future and more congenial home for Lady Bohun in the event of anything happening to himself.

"The idea alters the case, alters my views upon it, and removes many of my objections," thought Mr. Blackstone, as he seemed only to be gazing around him, but was inwardly pondering on his daughter's position. "It is, doubtless, the reason of the purchase, and a wise one, too, for what could a lone widow do with such an estate as this magnificent Bohun Court?"

And what, indeed, for the matter of that, could a lone widow do in such a house? and over such an establishment? and such a girl, too, as his "Phemy?" No; on second thoughts, that town-house plan was not so very unwise and extravagant, after all; and Mr. Blackstone inwardly resolved, should any opposition arise on the part

of Mr. Bohun, to impart to him this new and luminous idea, secure that the effect would be immediate acquiescence.

CHAPTER XXV.

"A TELEGRAM for Mr. Bohun!"

Great excitement in the club, and the club servants running in and out of the rooms, and up and down stairs, to find Mr. Bohun, who sits quietly in one of the deep windows waiting for Mr. Blackstone, whom he expected in town by an early train.

Is there any one in the world who receives a telegram with perfect equanimity and indifference? Is there a living soul, who, engaged in writing a letter, will calmly lay down a telegram, and not commence the perusal of it until he has finished his occupation? No; a telegram rarely fails to quicken the pulse of the recipient, and to excite the intense curiosity of all the bystanders, even though the former may have a Christmas dinner on the *tapis*, and guesses that the cabalistic signals will merely have formed the words, "The turkey is on its way."

But the telegram in question both startled and alarmed Mr. Bohun; so much so, that he felt half inclined to accept the offer of an officious friend, who in the irresistible ardour of inquisitiveness, had said, "Shall I open it for you?"

"William Blackstone to Guy Bohun, Esq.

"Wait until I come."

Short and sweet. Provoking, disappointing, unsatisfactory. "Wait until I come!" And how long might that be? Was his journey to be postponed? his plans a second time entirely upset? every personal arrangement completely set aside, and he himself laconically commanded to "wait,"

by one who ought rather to have consulted *his* convenience than have issued the order so very cavalierly? But Mr. Bohun saw another hand in this telegram—it did not seem to him as if the spirit of poor, good, easy, unoffending Mr. Blackstone had moved it—it was some one less guileless, more designing.

“And she stops my journey for *this* day, at all events,” said he to himself; and he had nothing to do for it but to wait, as he was bid, and postpone Bohun Court till the next morning.

People who saw him read his missive, lay it by, and calmly resume his seat, exclaimed, “Now, isn’t that like Bohun?—what an imperturbable fellow it is!” But the close of that day witnessed him in a very different mood; for once again the club servants were running about, and once again a great excitement prevailed, for there was a second telegraphic despatch for Mr. Bohun, and this time his agitation, as he read it, was unmistakable.

His hands trembled—the colour rushed up into his forehead—he started from his chair, and, seizing his hat, hurried out of the club. On the stone steps, as he ran out, another gentleman was running in.

“Mr. Bohun, my dear sir! how can I apologise to you? But I assure you——”

“Mr. Blackstone, no apology is necessary, but I cannot be detained!” was the breathless answer. “Porter, call me a cab—there—stop that one!” and Mr. Bohun sprang into the first Hansom.

“But sir, dear sir!” cried the old lawyer, in pitiable distress, “the papers! the papers!”

“No papers on earth shall stop me now,” were the words that burst from Mr. Bohun’s angry lips, and the next moment he was out of sight. Mr. Blackstone stood watching the retreating cab in mute bewilderment. A gentleman came up to him.

“I hope,” said he, “that nothing has happened to Sir Felix Bohun?”

Mr. Blackstone was in that state that he was glad that any human voice should address him. He was full of questions, and had nobody of whom to ask them, consequently, he hailed the courteous address eagerly.

“Nothing, nothing—not that I am aware of, and I left

him three hours ago in his usual health; but as for Mr. Bohun, what on earth has come to Mr. Bohun I am at a loss to imagine. Can you tell me, sir, what has agitated him to this degree?"

"He has had a telegraph."

"Ah, yes, I know! but it could not be that, for I sent it myself, and there was nothing in it but four words on a little matter of business of very slight importance."

"Then he had a second telegraph."

"A second?—bless my soul!" It was now Mr. Blackstone's turn to tremble. "A second?—where? how? what?—how a second?"

No one could afford him any further information. The affair had been so momentary that all he could elicit was, that Mr. Bohun had crushed the letter in his hand and rushed out of the club.

"Then," said Mr. Blackstone, sitting down faintly in the porter's chair, "Sir Felix has died suddenly."

They brought a glass of water and loosened the old man's cravat, for he looked ready to drop, when suddenly the officious friend who had been so anxious to read Mr. Bohun's first telegram to him came flying down the stairs.

"I've found it!" he cried; "found it crumpled up under his chair; now we shall know——"

"No, no, no!" exclaimed Mr. Blackstone, extending his hand with sudden energy; "it is a private communication. Let me beg of you, sir, for honour's sake, to allow the contents to remain sacred."

"But I've read it already," was the reply, "and I can't make head or tail of it. Perhaps you, sir, knowing the members of the family, may be able to enlighten us."

Mr. Blackstone was in a painful position. Extreme anxiety to learn what had happened, and a very nice sense of honour, were antagonistic feelings warring within him. The finder of the letter, however, had no conscientious scruples. He read out the message in blissful ignorance of such sentiments—

"John Burley to Guy Bohun, Esq.—Please, sir, come directly. Foul play with Hector; question of shooting him!"

A dead silence. Thus ran the telegraphic message, and neither could Mr. Blackstone make "head or tail" of it.

Yet an expression of great relief came over his countenance.

"Thank heaven!" he ejaculated, whilst drawing a deep breath, "it can be nothing affecting my daughter. I thank you, gentlemen, for your kind attention. Lady Bohun is my daughter; and I beg to take my leave."

A dust-covered traveller, in the summer evening twilight, springs out of the railway train, and enters the first conveyance that presents itself. No need to tell the driver where to go; every one knows Mr. Bohun; and in half an hour he is at the gates of Bohun Court.

The evening is sultry—not a breath of air stirring—and he takes off his hat as he hurries up the avenue, for, even in his agony of haste, he thinks of his invalid brother, whom the unexpected wheels might startle, and, therefore, alighted at the lodge. He enters the hall, and his step rings as he crosses it, but before his own door is gained, the old butler meets him.

"Oh, sir! I humbly beg your pardon for sending for you, since it was only to grieve you, but——"

"No apology, Burley, you did perfectly right," interrupted Mr. Bohun; "but tell me, in one word—what about Hector?"

The tone and the manner were totally unlike Mr. Bohun. It seemed really (as he had once himself remarked) that since his brother's marriage an evil spirit had been stirred up within him, and evil passions roused which might otherwise never have found birth. The Mr. Bohun, who now faced the shaking and trembling Burley, was a man on whose face sat a dark scowl, and in whose manner there was an imperious severity which completely metamorphosed him.

"What about Hector?" he repeated, before Burley had had time to answer.

"Oh, sir! he was sent down to the kennels last night."

"By whose orders?"

"My lady's, sir; and he howled, and fretted, and furied all night, and kept everybody awake, sir, besides setting all the other dogs off, and we heard it all; and this morning up comes William——"

"Fool, fool that I was!" muttered Mr. Bohun; "I should have done it myself! Well?"

"Up comes William, sir, and says nobody dares go near him, for that he raved and foamed like mad, and my lady she catches at the word, as it were, and oh! sir—I can't hardly tell you—I know how you loved that 'ere dog, sir, and I made bold to tell my lady so—but——"

"Go on," said Mr. Bohun, setting his teeth, "go on—they talked of shooting him, and you telegraphed to me?"

"Yes, sir; oh, yes!——"

Burley wrung his hands, and Mr. Bohun turned pale.

"They have not done it?" said he, in a slow, husky, concentrated sort of voice.

"I went down to the kennels, sir, and looked at him as he lay rolling, and I says 'Hector!' and he looked up at me as bright-like, and sensible——"

Mr. Bohun waved his hand, whilst a contraction of pain crossed his face. "Go on," said he; "they have not *done* it?"

The old butler was silent; his eyes fell before the gaze fastened on him by Mr. Bohun, and it was the latter who answered his own question.

"They have shot him," said he; and Burley's continued silence betrayed the truth.

Not a word more passed between them, for, instantly turning, Mr. Bohun crossed the hall again, entered the dining-room, which was vacant, and passing through it with rapid strides, had in another moment confronted his brother and Lady Bohun, both seated at the open window, overlooking the lawn and park.

"Guy!" cried Sir Felix, starting, as if he had seen a ghost; but Lady Bohun never uttered a syllable. Apparently thrown off her guard, she stared up in his face with terrified eyes and parted lips.

It was on her, not on Sir Felix, that he bent that flashing look of scornful indignation, as, in a voice which quickened even *her* pulse, he exclaimed, "By whose orders has my dog been shot?"

A pause—one of those guilty silences which speak volumes—but Mr. Bohun would not break it. He waited, now glancing from one to the other, but still waiting with a sort of savage determination, resolved neither to repeat his question nor to speak until it was answered, and he knew well with whom he had to deal. She should see his

wrath in all its might, but his grief she should never guess! At last her eyes turned coward, and directed themselves towards her husband.

Lady Bohun was frightened for once in her life, and looked to the poor infirm invalid by her side to defend her. It was Sir Felix who spoke.

"Ah! my dear Guy, who has told you the sad news? We meant to break it to you by degrees!"

A smile, very faint, but still a smile, as if to say, "Very well done," just curled Lady Bohun's lip, and she seemed to rally.

"I demand," continued Mr. Bohun, "by whose orders has my dog been shot?"

"My dear Guy," began Sir Felix, in a feeble, alarmed voice—

"Let *me* speak, dearest Sir Felix," interrupted his wife, laying her hand on his arm; then, again raising her eyes to Mr. Bohun's face, but this time dauntlessly, she said, "*By mine*," with a slight bow, as though she would have added, had she dared, "now do your worst!"

"By yours?" Mr. Bohun met that presumptuous gaze very calmly. "By yours, Lady Bohun? and by what right did you presume—yes," he repeated, as she started at the word, "by what right did you *presume*, even in this house, to give such an order?"

"By my right as mistress here, to order the death of any animal who was pronounced mad," retorted Lady Bohun.

"Who pronounced him mad?" was the next question.

"Every one," said she.

"Name one person," he persisted.

"I can name two," she exclaimed, passionately, "the stable-helper, William, and—and—Ponsford. They both said the dog was mad."

"I do not believe it," said Mr. Bohun; "and, Felix, I desire that the man who executed the order be immediately dismissed—have I your permission to do so?"

"Upon my word!" cried Lady Bohun, springing up, "am I to sit here, and be insulted in this manner, Sir Felix? Do you allow such conduct as this towards your wife?"

"Dearest Euphemia!" began Sir Felix, querulously, "be calm—Guy is right, he is justified—he knows best

indeed—it is a very sad, unfortunate, hasty business, and has upset me completely! but I have no doubt Guy is right——”

“Right to insult me, by daring to question my word?”

Mr. Bohun curled his lip.

“Felix, I shall dismiss William. I believe he is the man who——”

“Who executed *my* order,” cried Euphemia.

“Exactly,” replied Mr. Bohun. “I thought none other would have ventured to execute an order, which, had Lady Bohun trusted to her own judgment, I hope would never have been issued.”

“The dog was mad!” persisted her ladyship, with the rage of a child; and, bursting into a passion of tears, she rushed from the room.

Sir Felix clasped his hands despairingly, and Mr. Bohun quietly seated himself in the vacated chair by his side.

“Guy! Guy! I would have given my right hand rather than this should have happened. It was not my fault—I knew nothing of it. I certainly heard poor Hector very violent all night, because the wind set this way, and, poor fellow, he felt strange down at the kennels no doubt, and fretted himself wild; but, as to the order, it was William brought up the news that Hector was foaming at the mouth, and then Ponsford said he must be mad, and poor Euphemia was dreadfully alarmed; in fact, Guy, such a day as I have spent, I hope never to spend again! I only assure you, most solemnly, I had nothing to do with it!”

“Felix,” said Mr. Bohun, “that man William must go.”

“My dear Guy, I wish, oh! I wish he could! but Euphemia has raised him to be her own groom—she rides now—what can I do?”

“Do you, then, like him?”

“I detest him—he drinks,” whispered Sir Felix, looking cautiously towards the door.

“He *shall* go,” said Mr. Bohun; “give me your permission, and he *shall*.”

“Will you take it upon yourself, Guy?”

“Most willingly. He shall not sleep another night beneath our stable roof. And now, my dear Felix, about business—you know I must return to town——”

“No, no—oh, no!” cried Sir Felix, vehemently, yet still

in a whisper. "You must not leave me—you *must* not! You do not know all I go through—I want to tell you, but they give me no time. Oh! Guy, I beseech you not to desert me!"

Mr. Bohun was shocked at the look and manner of his brother whilst making this appeal: it was abject, imploring, and fearfully excited.

"My dear Felix, only for a few hours, merely to sign those papers about the money you wish to sell out for the purchase of the house in —— Square."

"The papers must come down here—all the lawyers in London may come if they like, too, but go you must not. Guy——Guy——is any one near?——Guy——I have something on my mind—on my conscience; I have done something I repent of; but I was worked upon—compulsion and intimidation have been at work. I have been induced to commit an act which is an injury to you—the remembrance of it is killing me; but, before I die, it shall be repaired—they will try hard not to give me time, but I will *make* time—only don't leave me, Guy! in mercy don't desert me!"

"I will not—but——"

"No buts. I know you have much to bear—so have I; but bear it for my sake. It may not be for long, only don't desert me! try and bear it a little longer; promise me—it may be selfish—but, for my sake, promise."

"I do, then," said Mr. Bohun, bitterly; "I promise—whatever betide."

"Never to leave me?"

"Yes."

"Till I die?"

"Yes, Felix—I promise."

"Swear it!"

"I swear."

Lady Bohun sat sobbing in her room, sobbing with rage and vexation. By her side stood Ponsford, unmoved. "All your fault, Ponsford, for letting William come up to the house, gossiping! If you had managed it all quietly, it would have been over before Burley knew anything about it, and that odious man would never have come down just at this unfortunate moment! Sir Felix gave in to him in an instant, when Mr. Bohun said William should be dis-

missed, and now of course, he will go! and there they are now, closeted together, brewing all sorts of mischief, I dare say, and such an object as I am, how can I go down? —all your fault, Ponsford!"

"No, my lady," was the gentle answer, though her words were gall and wormwood; "*your* fault, not mine. If your ladyship had kept your temper and stood your ground, you would have mastered Mr. Bohun. As it is, whatever happens, you have no one to thank but yourself."

Did Lady Bohun quietly bear this soft insolence? did not the hot, impetuous blood boil up again? No; it was too late in the day for that; Ponsford had made good *her* stand in Bohun Court, and lorded it over everybody with the comfortable assurance that whosoever else might be dismissed, there was no one who dared turn *her* out.

As for Lady Bohun, Ponsford looked upon her with the most supreme, though well-concealed, contempt, and exerted over her that marvellous influence which a strong mind invariably gains over a weak one; the influence, also, of perfect temper and self-control over a violent disposition.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A WEEK passed, and then Mrs. Blackstone arrived, accompanied by Mrs. and Miss Washington, and Captain Aylmer. Mr. Blackstone was detained in town on business, and was not to join the party for some days, if at all, much to Euphemia's relief; for, to tell the truth, she was a little alarmed lest her keen-sighted father should discover that there was something amiss between herself and Mr. Bohun, and favour her with a second lecture.

From the day of the scene about Hector's death, she and her brother-in-law had not exchanged a syllable. He avoided her society as much as possible, and she evaded every opportunity of speaking to him, and now the inconvenience of such a state of affairs began to make itself felt.

Nothing would have been more bitterly annoying to Lady Bohun than for her dear friends, the Washingtons, to find out that there was the slightest drawback to her brilliant position—nothing would have been so provoking to her as to see that Mrs. Washington doubted her perfect felicity. Yet so well acquainted was Euphemia with that lady's powers of penetration, that she felt very sure no skeleton could be in the cupboard of any house in which she was staying without her dragging it triumphantly forth from its hiding-place.

So this must be prevented—yes, at any cost—even that most humiliating of all, the “making it up” with Mr. Bohun; “eating humble pie,” to such a man as that! Yet it must be done, dear as the price was, for Ponsford said so.

“Mrs. Washington and Miss Maynard are both just the sort of people *to talk*,” Ponsford had said, “if you and Mr. Bohun are not upon terms, my lady.”

“But I hate him, Ponsford.”

“Yes, my lady; but people need not know that. There are plenty of ways of keeping him in awe of you, without giving others the satisfaction of seeing that there is a coolness.”

A coolness! oh, horrid word! *a coolness*. What an immeasurable depth of misery is contained, very often, in that small word when it creeps in, like a destroying worm, gnawing, gnawing, gnawing at the core, eating the heart away, hollowing it out, and leaving the surface fair and smiling for the world to look upon! And people go on for years and years, acting their part on the face of society well, all smiles outside, all hollow and bitter within—the old story of the apples of the desert over and over again. *A coolness* between them!

So there assembled in the drawing-room, that first day of the arrival of the guests, an apparently well-assorted party of twelve people: Sir Felix and Lady Bohun, Admiral and Miss Maynard, Mrs. Blackstone and Mrs. and Miss Washington, Mr. Bohun, Captain Aylmer, Mr. Melville the clergyman, and two stray gentlemen of the neighbourhood.

Lady Bohun played her part for the first time.

would have thought Mr. Bohun had been the dearest friend she had in the world, and no one was astonished at her affectionate attention towards him except himself. People were accustomed to see Mr. Bohun made much of; the Maynards and Mr. Melville had always thought more of him than of Sir Felix—(indeed, the latter, in Miss Maynard's eyes, was a nonentity)—therefore, Lady Bohun's consideration attracted no attention in the quarters where he was known, but to the lynx-eyed vision of Mrs. Washington, the lady's acting was not faultless—she rather overplayed the part.

"Fanny," said Mrs. Washington to her daughter, as she watched Euphemia flitting through the conservatory after dinner, cutting camellias, "I've found out something. Phemy's frightened out of her wits at that man. I never saw her so civil to anybody before!"

But it was Mr. Bohun who was the most astonished. Till now he had set down many of Lady Bohun's faults to a mean, petty jealousy, a love of tyranny, and the tempers of a spoilt child; but in her present conduct he saw more than this—he saw deliberate deceit: he had begun by pitying, he had now learnt to despise. This feeling no doubt influenced his manner, for no sooner did the gentlemen come into the drawing-room after dinner than Mrs. Washington signalled to Captain Aylmer to come and sit by her side that she might find out all she could. She wished to know what he thought of Mr. Bohun.

"I find he lives here entirely; so of course, for poor dear Phemy's sake, I am anxious to know what sort of a person he is."

"What sort of person do *you think*?" returned Captain Aylmer, with a diplomacy which would have done honour to a wiser head.

"A much more haughty, overbearing sort of character than I at first imagined," said Mrs. Washington, confidentially; "and I am sorry for it, because I look upon it as a sort of take-in. Phemy never anticipated it, I know, and it must be unpleasant for her to have the heir presumptive alway on the watch by her side."

"Who says he *is* the heir presumptive?" exclaimed Captain Aylmer, quickly.

"Hush! not so loud—of course he is. Sir Felix would never dream of passing over his brother, unless for a son."

"I don't know. Phemy's a sharp one, you know, Mrs. Washington, and my idea is——"

"That she will have the life-interest?"

"Certainly, if not more."

"You don't say so!" ejaculated Mrs. Washington, biting her lips.

"No, I *don't*," retorted Captain Aylmer; "but it is *my idea*."

Mrs. Washington was not sure that his ideas were ever worth much, but this one was an annoying one. It would place Phemy on too proud an eminence a great deal.

"And," said the old lady, forgetting that she was speaking her thoughts aloud, "her husband does not look as if he would last very long."

"I don't think he will," replied her companion, quietly.

"But if it ends as you think," she continued, "perhaps Phemy does not mind keeping a skeleton in her cupboard. She certainly conceals it very well."

And this was all Euphemia gained for spending an evening of torturing humiliation. It was fortunate she did not hear another whispered conversation going on over a game of *ecarté*.

"Mr. Bohun, I don't like the looks of Sir Felix."

"You may well say that, Miss Maynard. I dislike them myself very much indeed."

"He looks very screwy."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nonsense, Mr. Bohun; seedy, then."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Mr. Bohun, if you will not allow me to talk in my own language, I will not talk to you at all."

"Oh! miserable man that I am. Then we must play our game in silence. Miss Maynard, do you permit me to propose?"

"You deserve to be refused; but tell me seriously what ails Sir Felix? Father and I have a great affection for him after our fashion, and speaking now for myself, I

honestly confess it grieves me to see him. What is the matter, and has he had advice?"

Mr. Bohun laid down his cards. "He has had the advice of the first medical men in London, but he still goes on failing. Miss Maynard, my brother is seriously ill."

"I can see it; but what is it? He looks so strange—so nervous—so alarmed—as if spirits were whispering horrid things to him. How long has he been in this state?"

"Some time, I fear, but I have only known of it lately."

"What, did you not know till you went up to town?"

"No."

"I did, Mr. Bohun; I heard it from many of my London friends, but thought if you had wished it spoken of, you would have told us yourself."

"Miss Maynard, I was the only person *not* told," said Mr. Bohun, bitterly; and the moment the words had passed his lips, Miss Maynard laid down her cards, too.

"I thought so," she exclaimed; "I always told father so, and he used to say to me, 'Don't be putting things into people's imaginations, Jem;' but I always said, depend upon it, the vampire has not got into that house for nothing. I would stake my existence that Ponsford is at the bottom of all this. Do you agree with me, Mr. Bohun?"

He shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. Miss Maynard continued—

"Did I not ask you, months and months ago, if the vampire had begun her deadly work yet? Upon my word, I believe she has, though I have only been a few hours in the house to judge. But I find a great change. She received me when I arrived, and conducted me to my room. Mrs. Dance always used to do that."

"I believe Dance has resigned," said Mr. Bohun; "but I ask no questions."

"I am glad, however, to see Burley still in his accustomed place. It does one good to hear his sonorous tones singing out, 'Dinner, Sir Felix!'"

At this moment there was a slight stir in the room. Till then Sir Felix had been in deep conversation with his

old friend, Mr. Melville, her ladyship hovering continually round their chairs; but now he started, and a change came over his countenance. A tall, slight figure, with noiseless step, had approached and whispered in his ear; her dress, a sort of soft, steel-coloured, cloudy material, gave her a shadowy appearance, and, by general consent, there was a silence as she stood there, leaning over the invalid.

Mr. Bohun rose hastily and crossed the room. "Do you wish to retire so early, Felix?" said he.

"Yes, yes—I—I think so," was the tremulous reply; "perhaps it is better for me. I may be more able to enjoy your society to-morrow if I leave you now."

Mrs. Washington touched Miss Maynard's arm. "That's Ponsford," she whispered; "that's the woman I would not have in my house if she asked me on her knees."

"Oh, I know her well!" was the reply.

"My dear friend," said Mr. Melville, as Sir Felix, on Ponsford's arm, prepared to leave the room, "I can come and have a little quiet chat with you when you are ready for me."

Ponsford gave Lady Bohun a glance.

"Mr. Melville," said Euphemia, hurriedly, "I am very sorry, but we had the most strict orders from our medical man that dear Sir Felix should not speak a syllable after retiring for the night. At ten he takes a composing draught. Forgive me for seeming so unfriendly, but, indeed, I must be very strict."

"Mr. Bohun," said Miss Maynard, in a low voice, "just look at the smile on Ponsford's face! For mercy's sake, beware of the vampire!"

The next morning things had settled more into their places. People began to look about and amuse themselves. The new reign was putting out the feeble light of the old one; and Euphemia, well tutored by an invisible agent in the art of hostess-hospitality, was indefatigable in her exertions to enlist every one of her guests in some species of amusement.

Insensibly, she gave Sir Felix less of her company. Insensibly, those nervous attentions, so watchful and so fidgety, which she had lavished on him in town, relaxed, and she resigned the guard she had so long held into other hands. Something appeared to have taken a weight

off her mind, and it seemed now her sole study to divert her guests and attract them away from the contemplation of affairs indoors, by a ceaseless round of gaieties out of doors.

Over Sir Felix, too, there came a great change. Mr. Bohun had thought this a good opportunity for running up to town again, and had once more sounded the ground with his brother. It was on this occasion that he saw the change. Instead of the usual distressing opposition, the answer he had received was, "Do—do, Guy—but come back soon; not that I want you to hurry for my sake, for I am happy now—quite, quite happy—only come back soon!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

AND Mr. Bohun went up to town, never having given his brother's remark more than the thought of a moment—treating it more as one of his usual exclamations, dreamy, mystical, and unconnected as they now often were.

His departure acted like champagne on many of the visitors at Bohun Court. Euphemia led the revels now with a buoyancy hitherto unheard in those old walls, and fresh guests relieved each other every day. But in the library from morning to night, or out in his garden-chair, sat Sir Felix Bohun, one attendant only by his side, one ever unwearied, reading to him, waiting on him, walking by his side, gathering flowers for him, never leaving him.

"And if I were Phemy," cried Mrs. Washington, in the dull ear of Mamma Blackstone, "I would give up all this society rather than leave that poor old man so completely in the hands, and the power, and at the mercy of that Mrs. Ponsford!"

There are some people who can never be pleased. Phemy was a great deal too prosperous to please her friends. They all secretly predicted a fall; but Mrs. Blackstone had no such misgivings. She enjoyed seeing all the splendour around her. She thought Bohun Court

a little dull and sombre, and too stately in its magnificence (particularly after her own faultless Laurels, so fresh and so light, and always smelling so new); but still it was very satisfactory to see Phemy so well settled—she never used the term “happy,” it was always “well settled”—and she could not imagine what her dear friend, Mrs. Washington, saw to find fault with; as for Ponsford, “I am sure she suits my daughter to perfection.”

“So she may; but, my dear, anybody can see that she rules the whole house.”

“Very true,” replied Mrs. Blackstone, who grew more deaf every day, and took this remark for a compliment; “so she does, just as if she had always been intended for a housekeeper; but the fact is, the other is superannuated, and Ponsford just fills up the gap, so my daughter tells me.”

“I am glad it suits Phemy to think so,” said Mrs. Washington, with a sneer.

“She really does,” returned happy Mrs. Blackstone, oblivious of half the sentence; “if she had hunted the whole world over, she could not have found any one to suit her better.”

But Mrs. Washington was not the only individual who did not quite like the goings on at Bohun Court.

“Jem,” shouted the Admiral one day to his daughter, “who may that young spark be whom my lady calls Sydney?”

“Oh, father, that is a cousin!”

“Humph! If I were Sir Felix I should have my wits a little more about me, eh?”

“I am disappointed in Lady Bohun, father,” replied Miss Maynard, evasively; “she has fallen off in every way. As for Captain Aylmer, he is merely a tame puppy.”

“Waiting to step into the old man’s shoes, eh?”

Miss Maynard was generally acute enough herself, but this idea had not occurred to her, and she felt both disgusted and indignant.

Her affection for Bohun Court and every one connected with it was great, so that, when once put on the alert, she determined to make her own observations. She felt aggrieved, personally offended, on Sir Felix’s account, and

it gave her actual pain to see the Bohun name so degraded; from that moment she could barely bring herself to be civil. One good thing was, Euphemia gave her female friends but little of her company. She devised all sorts of amusements for them, and she had three carriages of which they might take their choice; but her own place was in her saddle from morning till night, and by her side, as a matter of course, was the only other equestrian of the party, Captain Aylmer. Behind them rode William, the groom—not yet dismissed!

So Miss Maynard waited and watched, and saw that her father's old eyes had been unusually sharp-sighted, and moreover that in Mr. Bohun's absence, her ladyship boldly flirted with her cousin in presence of Sir Felix, which till now she had not ventured to do.

People in a country neighbourhood are fond of finding a new topic of conversation. From high to low, the new subject was now Lady Bohun and her cousin. The gentry exclaimed loudly at all they gathered, and the villagers would come to their cottage doors, as the pair rode rapidly down the street, and cry with simple truth, "Dear heart! my lady is better matched with that 'ere young gentleman than poor old Sir Felix!"

"Poor old Sir Felix!" Oh! if he could but have heard it! he who, two years before, was a gay, gallant man of a certain age, in admirable preservation, just going to be married for the third time!

But how did the report get about? Who was it who had whispered tales of "an old love, too poor to marry?"—that old, old story, which everybody seems able to claim and call their own—that episode which seems to form a part of so many and many a life! Nobody could tell who had first propagated the scandal, but certain it was that it was rife in the neighbourhood, and, as is sometimes the case, those most nearly concerned were the last to hear it. Yet, singularly enough, it was now Lady Bohun herself who first became aware of the remarks that were being made, and it was Ponsford who informed her of them, the morning that Mr. Bohun was expected home again.

"If they come to Mr. Bohun's ears, my lady," said the confidential servant, with the impertinence over which

Euphemia now found she had no control, "you will be sorry for it, for the two late Lady Bohuns were models of propriety."

"And who dares to say a word against *my* conduct?" cried Euphemia.

"It is the talk of the village, my lady; and I considered it my duty to name it."

"Impertinent, insolent gossips!" muttered her ladyship. (She dared not say "insolent woman.")

"So they may be," returned Ponsford, in her provokingly cool, indifferent way; "but whether the gossiping be true or false, the effect is all the same, and I know very well, my lady, what Mr. Bohun can be, if he chooses. He will put up with a good deal, but not with anything of this kind. I say it for your ladyship's good, before he comes —"

"My good! What harm can he do *me*, I should like to know?"

"A great deal," was the calm reply.

Lady Bohun opened her eyes. Once or twice, lately, Ponsford had breathed mysterious hints, and Euphemia was unable to fathom them.

"What kind of harm?" she again asked.

"Mr. Bohun's influence over Sir Felix is undiminished, my lady."

"And what then?"

Had not Lady Bohun uttered these words with an air of imperious defiance, Ponsford's reply might have been more guarded. The defiance was not intended as personal, but general; but Ponsford took it as directed towards herself, and rebelled against it accordingly.

"Oh! my lady," said she, with a laugh most galling to the proud spirit of her mistress, "it is not in human nature that Sir Felix would like to hear that a successor is ready, and waiting for Bohun Court (unless it were his own brother), and it is very certain that if Mr. Bohun ever dreamt of such a thing, he would take very good care of his own interests, and take active measures without a moment's loss of time."

"Other people can take care of their own interests, and take active measures, too, as well as Mr. Bohun," exclaimed Euphemia, colouring crimson with rage and humiliation,

any man's temper; however, I will keep mine, if I can, and do your bidding cleverly."

Sir Felix always dined with his guests, but in the morning he was never seen. Accordingly, Captain Aylmer prepared to announce his dire intentions as soon as the dessert was put on the table.

"I am sorry to say, Sir Felix, this is the last time I shall have the pleasure of sitting with you at dinner. I regret to say, my leave has expired."

A glance at Euphemia, and a grunt from the Admiral to his daughter across the table.

"I was not aware your visit was to close so abruptly," said Sir Felix, stiffly.

"Why, no: but, you know, when one is under orders," (another glance,) "one must obey, even though it's a bore. But I have had a very pleasant time of it, Sir Felix, thank you, and I like Bohun Court *hugely*."

"You do me honour," replied the Baronet, still more stiffly.

"Yes, I do really, though I often tell Phemy I could suggest such an improvement!"

"I shall be glad to hear it," was the answer.

"I'll tell you," said the captain, coolly; "whitewash it!"

There was a faint scream at table, and it proceeded from Miss Maynard.

"Whitewash Bohun Court?" she cried; "you had better cut down the Bohun woods, too, then, whilst you are about it, and then the ancient mansion will stand out in as beautiful relief as any citizen's box in merry England!"

"Well done, Jem!" muttered the Admiral.

"You are right, Miss Maynard," returned the young man, twirling his moustaches, and nothing daunted; "there is a great deal too much timber about the house. It is that that makes you so rheumatic, Sir Felix."

If anything had been wanting to make that young man more obnoxious than he already was to his host, it would have been these remarks. Sir Felix pushed his chair several inches back from the table, a sign he was unusually irritated; and Euphemia, her cheeks burning at her cousin's daring revenge for her dismissal, hastily gave the signal to rise, and retired from table.

"Yes; I choose it. Mr. Bohun returns to-night—perhaps he has already arrived; and I have no idea of these idle idiots telling him their impertinent tales about you and me. In the first place, it is false and malicious, and, in the next, any report of the kind might do me the most serious and irretrievable injury. I cannot be more explicit. You must feel assured that my reasons are all-sufficient, otherwise I should never be so apparently inhospitable."

"But, Phemy, I have still ten days of my leave left; it will look so strange in the eyes of everybody my going in this hurry."

Euphemia had expected opposition; her vanity would have been wounded had she not met it; but the manner in which he offered it was not flattering; he made it appear as if his leaving Bohun Court were a personal inconvenience, besides "looking strange" in people's eyes—not breathing sighs of grief at leaving her, which she had rather expected. So she took him up sharply.

"What does it signify how it looks? What do I care? I only intend that you should go. I am not going to have all my prospects injured because your leave happens to want ten days of its expiration. Not so, my good sir. I may dance with you five times running at a London ball and no one troubles their head, but it seems I am not to ride out by your side here, in the wilds of the Bohun woods, without rousing the virtuous indignation and shocking the immaculate propriety of the whole neighbourhood, so it shall just be put a stop to, and to-morrow morning, Mr. Sydney, off you go; so make your arrangements and your apologies without loss of time."

And away floated the airy figure to meet her guests just as they began to assemble for dinner.

Captain Aylmer looked after her.

"Injure her prospects—seriously and irretrievably—that's the game, is it? So! Lady Bohun! You are not, then, so very sure of your ground as you have given people to think. A skeleton in even *your* cupboard! But, luckily, you have let out the secret in very good time. I will not spoil your sport, fair cousin, though to leave your worthy husband's partridges on the eve of the slaughterous first of September will spoil mine, besides being enough to try

"Certainly she is," replied Mr. Bohun.

"See, see!" continued Sir Felix; "see, and be quick—is she gone?"

Mr. Bohun walked to the door with his usual bold, heavy step, and opened the door wide. He could see to the end of the passage, and there there was a swing door of red baize; it swung as he opened the library door in which they were sitting; Ponsford had been waiting—*listening*—in that passage, and Mr. Bohun's blood boiled, but he said nothing to his brother—why vex him needlessly? Why make him feel still more than he certainly already felt, that he was the victim of that worst of all species of tyranny, the tyranny of a servant? But she had evidently heard every word of their discourse.

"Is she gone?" repeated the invalid, with an anxious, inquiring gaze.

"There is no one there," said Mr. Bohun.

"Then now I will tell you!" cried Sir Felix, brightening up, and clasping his brother's hands with vehemence; "my dear, good, faithful Guy, I will tell you all—tell you what no one in the wide world knows but Melville and Wheeler" (this was his medical attendant). "You need not buy the Lodge; you shall have it. It is yours during my life by courtesy; it will be yours after my death by right. God bless you, Guy, for all you have been to me! and God forgive me for ever having, in a moment of intimidation—yes, so help me heaven!" he exclaimed wildly, "a moment of *intimidation*, executed a deed to wrong and injure you most bitterly! But thank God, thank God, for life and opportunity—I have lived to cancel that wicked document! Look here!" and opening his dressing-gown, a garment of richest brocade, lined with quilted silk, he showed his brother a little slit frayed away in the lining, in which he had concealed what appeared to be half a sheet of paper. "Look here! see what a hiding-place! A codicil, Guy! Nothing injurious to my wife—no, she has her due! She will have the house in town, and seven thousand a year—ample, ample! and you, the baronet, will, of course, have all the rest. It is as it should be, thank God! Oh! how thankful and happy I am no words can say! And, scrap as it is, it is properly signed, sealed, attested; no fear, dear Guy; all is right, and now I shall

die in peace. But do not you forget where to look," he added, carefully reclosing the dressing-gown; "no one can suspect, because it is far down in the lining—don't you forget—but I am so happy! Oh, Guy, if this were my last hour!—"

"Sir Felix," said a voice of icy coldness, "this agitation is most unwise, most injurious—you must immediately take your draught, and I feel sure Mr. Bohun will pardon my begging you to try and sleep, since Mr. Wheeler's express orders were that you should be kept perfectly quiet."

Could she have heard? Even Mr. Bohun, temperate and calm as was his nature, now trembled with emotion. Could she have heard? could she have seen? If so, ought he to leave the room? ought so important a paper to be left in such a hiding-place, on such a risk?

No! ten thousand times, no! And Mr. Bohun took the glass, with the composing draught in it, deliberately out of Ponsford's hands, and administered it to his brother himself.

Did he look up as he did so? No, he could not; *there* his heart and courage failed him; he could not meet the dreadful, fearful expression which he knew would be sitting like an evil spirit on the vampire's face; but he gave the draught, and drawing a chair close to his brother's side, he placed his hand on his arm with the words, "Now, do not speak another syllable. Everything is arranged as we could wish. Sleep!"

Mr. Bohun sat by his brother. Ponsford took her work, and seated herself in the window. She was evidently bent on standing her ground; so was Mr. Bohun; he left it to destiny to decide which would have to give way.

"If she leaves me alone with him, that paper shall be secured; if I am compelled to leave her here, all is lost. Now, Guy Bohun, your fate hangs on a chance!"

And half hour after half hour chimed on every clock within hearing, and still Sir Felix slept.

That day Mr. and Mrs. Blackstone, the last of the guests, were to leave Bohun Court, and Euphemia was fully occupied in assisting their departure, and driving them to the station. She had not been in to see her husband since the morning, and was not expected home till late, having arranged to take luncheon at some neighbour-

ing house. Thus, had it not been for the irritating presence of Ponsford, Mr. Bohun would have had his brother entirely to himself.

"Is she a creature of air?" thought he, as he heard the servants' dinner-bell ring, and she showed no signs of moving; "will she sit there for ever?"

But now a loud ring at the hall door, and a visitor's steps resounded over the wide expanse of the entrance. Ponsford looked up mildly.

"Her ladyship desired me to give a general order of not at home," said she, demurely: but, before Mr. Bohun had time to utter the reproof at her presumption which rose hastily to his lips, the door opened softly, and Mr. Wheeler, the doctor, came in.

With a silent bow, he took the seat vacated by Mr. Bohun at the side of the sleeping man, and fixed his eyes on his face.

"Has he been long asleep?"

"Unusually long," said Mr. Bohun.

"Two hours," said Ponsford.

"Did he take his draught?"

"Mr. Bohun gave it to Sir Felix, sir" (in a slightly-aggrieved tone).

"Ha!"

Very gently, as doctors touch the pulse of a slumberer, Mr. Wheeler laid his hand on the now-attenuated wrist of Sir Felix.

Mr. Bohun glanced inquiringly at him.

"Irregular," was the answer to the unspoken question; "very fitful, but Sir Felix has had a severe shock in the death of our good old friend, Mrs. Trant."

"Possibly, then," said Mr. Bohun, "the composing draught has had greater effect in consequence of his exhaustion, for he has been but feeble all to-day."

"Very possibly," said Mr. Wheeler, and he continued sitting by his patient's side.

There are few of us who do not know what it is to watch by the chair or the bed of a sleeper whose lamp of life is burning low. We sit still, and silent, and count the breathings, and watch the eyelids, and wait ready to reply, under our breath, to the first half-coherent words of returning consciousness, and we go on waiting and waiting

till the minutes stretch out into hours, and still—how he sleeps on.

So sat those three persons. The doctor, like all doctors, kept his own counsel well, but Mr. Bohun saw in his countenance some unusual misgiving, and watched him nervously.

Ponsford also watched, but on her features were no traces of nerves; not a muscle of that alabaster visage knew what it was to quiver, tremble, or even to relax, but she watched the trio steadily.

"I tell you what," said Mr. Wheeler, at last, as if trying to speak easily and cheerfully, and addressing himself to Ponsford; "it is growing late, and Sir Felix is a little worn out. I should get him into bed as soon as possible if I were you."

"At the risk of awaking him?" asked Mr. Bohun.

"This is not like natural sleep," was the reply, "it is exhaustion: he will hardly wake—at all events, I will wait and see."

"I will call Burley," said Mr. Bohun, moving to the bell.

"There is no necessity, sir," exclaimed Ponsford, hastily. "Sir Felix never requires Mr. Burley when he is in these sleeps. Mr. Wheeler will excuse me, but by merely drawing out his chair and lowering the back, it forms a bed on which he may perhaps rest till midnight. This is very frequently the case. I never disturb Sir Felix."

Mr. Wheeler bowed grimly, and walked towards the door. Mr. Bohun stood and watched Ponsford—watched her with a curious thrill at his heart—watched her stealthy movements, her quiet touch, her graceful hands—watched her lower the sleeping form, raise the resistless limbs, fold the drooping arms;—watched her jealously, breathlessly, as if his fate hung upon a thread (and so it did!).

And now all was done, and she turned towards him with that meekly-defiant air so peculiarly her own. It said as plainly as words, "For what are you waiting?"

Mr. Bohun's course was taken in a moment, for just then the hall bell resounded again, and he thought it was Lady Bohun returning. Should it prove so, his chance of securing that document was over, for it was difficult enough

to elude the vigilance of Ponsford—to elude that of both was impossible.

"Mr. Wheeler," said he, "may I trouble you to *remain here* whilst I go and speak to Lady Bohun? I am extremely uneasy about my brother; there is something in his appearance very alarming, and I feel that Lady Bohun should be prepared."

"You are quite right," replied Mr. Wheeler, and he resumed his place.

But the ring at the bell was not her ladyship. It was Mr. Melville, calling to inquire after his old friend, the very person Mr. Bohun most wished to see.

This was no moment for form and ceremony, there was no time for courteous greetings; he must dash into his subject at once.

"Mr. Melville, one word before you enter his room; are you aware—but of course you are—of the existence of that small codicil of my brother's?"

Mr. Bohun's voice shook—his whole manner was unlike himself—agitated and unsteady.

"Of course, my dear friend, surely I am; what of it?"

"Are you aware of its singular hiding-place?"

"Yes, and have remonstrated repeatedly, only Sir Felix assures me, he changes it every day."

"But he has this evening exhorted me to remember where it now is, as though he meant this to be its final place of concealment. It is now in the lining of his dressing-gown."

"Then we must take possession of it at once."

"That woman's presence, my dear friend, has prevented and interrupted me this whole day."

"But it shall not prevent *me*," exclaimed the old clergyman; "come and let us see to it at once."

These few sentences took but few minutes to utter, but before Mr. Bohun and his guest could reach the library, Ponsford emerged from it in great haste.

Her face was deadly pale.

"Is her ladyship here?" she asked, hurriedly.

"No; what is the matter?" was the equally-hurried rejoinder.

"Sir Felix has roused up, but he has fainted, sir; we

want some brandy, it is on the sideboard in the dining-room. Would you go to him, if you please, Mr. Bohun, whilst I get the brandy?"

But Mr. Bohun, close to the dining-room door, rushed in there and left Ponsford standing in the hall. He then returned and entered the library with Mr. Melville. By this time Sir Felix was in his bed. Mr. Wheeler had taken him up in his arms and lifted him in like a child. Ponsford stood quite in the background, still white as a sheet, and gazing on the recumbent, fainting figure of her master, with something very like terror in her eyes. At this moment Lady Bohun herself entered, and looking wildly round, paused at the door, her trembling lips seemingly afraid of asking what had happened, or what was going on.

It was Mr. Wheeler who spoke. "He is all right, now, Lady Bohun. Do not alarm yourself. Sir Felix is coming round nicely, and will be quite himself in a few minutes. By the time your ladyship has taken off your bennet, he will be ready to speak to you."

Euphemia turned away, and leant against the door with her hands over her eyes.

"Take Lady Bohun out of the room," whispered he to Ponsford; "I will take care of Sir Felix, but she must not see him in this state."

"Is he going?" whispered Mr. Bohun hoarsely.

"No; the appearance is worse than the reality; his pulse is returning, stronger and stronger; he will rally, only it is distressing to witness, and no one can be of any use; in fact, I think I had better remain, and both you and Mr. Melville trust him to me alone. When the fit is over, I will let you know. The butler may come, but not — *not that woman*, if you please."

"Does Wheeler know where that paper is?" asked Mr. Melville, as he and Mr. Bohun left the room together.

"I think not," was the answer; "I wished to have told him, but could find no opportunity."

"Then we are lost!" exclaimed Mr. Melville.

CHAPTER XXIX.

AND so it was. The opportunity had gone by.

That evening, Mr. Melville and Mr. Wheeler both dined at Bohun Court. It was the first time for many and many a week that so small, so silent, and so stiff a party had sat round that once festive table. Had not those two friends been constrained by circumstances to accept the message of invitation sent down by Lady Bohun, she and Mr. Bohun would have enjoyed a *tête-à-tête*. As it was, when the bell rung for dinner, they were told her ladyship was already in the dining-room, and when they joined her, there was a sort of awe over the whole party which rendered conversation impossible.

Mr. Bohun glanced once only at her face. It was without a tinge of her usual bright colour, and her long black eyelashes lay like a shadow on her cheek. She never once looked up, and as, after dinner, she noiselessly slid out of the room, he could hardly help asking himself, "*Does she feel, or is this all assumed?*"

All that night Sir Felix lay in a sort of stupor. The next morning he rallied completely, and his first question was for his brother.

"Where is Mr. Bohun? I wish to speak to him—and alone; call him."

It was Ponsford who received the order, but Burley who executed it, for, in spite of the anxiety with which Sir Felix uttered the words, she heard them unmoved, and displayed no intention of either obeying or leaving the room, until, on Mr. Bohun's arrival, Sir Felix repeated his desire to be alone. Then, indeed, she went, her step more hasty than usual, and, to the dying man, even this slight circumstance and its cause was very apparent—he understood her now so well.

"She leaves me, Guy, because I order her to do so. I am too far gone now to care for the power which she once exercised over me; but she only leaves me that she may bring Lady Bohun, knowing that to turn *her* out of the room would be impossible; but, till she comes, I can speak to you. It is of that paper—you know—well, I

want you to know, that last night, about dinner time, just as you left me, and she thought me sleeping, I felt her hand creeping cautiously to my hiding-place, searching for it, Guy—as surely as I live, searching for it! The agony of the thought was so great, that, in my terror to secure it from her, I started up, and the exertion overcame me—I fainted.”

“And the paper, Felix?”

“Is safe, for, fortunately, she was alarmed; when I roused up, it was still safe, thank Heaven, and since then she has had no opportunity to torment me further, for Wheeler has never left me; but now, Guy, till my last breath is drawn, I want you to watch her—to watch those insidious movements, those stealthy hands, those marvellous eyes which, though so seldom raised, see everything. Watch her, lest she discover my new hiding-place.”

“Then, Felix, you have concealed it elsewhere?”

“Yes—yes! in the dead of the night I felt a sudden strength.”

“But this is unwise, my dear brother. Tell me where it is, and let me give it either to Wheeler or Mr. Melville.”

“Good—good—so I will! and I only wish the idea had occurred to me before; however, it is not too late; here, take these keys, Guy.”

Sir Felix turned in his bed, and from between the mattresses drew out a bunch of three keys. He was in the act of offering them to Mr. Bohun, when Euphemia stood suddenly at his side, and he fell back on his pillow.

“What keys are those?” said she, in a voice of calm, icy, displeasure.

“Keys,” replied Mr. Bohun, without a moment’s hesitation, and taking them out of his brother’s hand with a grasp of iron, “keys which my brother entrusts to my care. Is it not so, Felix?”

Sir Felix made a gesture in the affirmative; but he was mute—trembling from head to foot. Behind Lady Bohun stood Ponsford.

“My lady,” said she, “these interviews are killing Sir Felix. You really should exert your authority, otherwise I shall be answerable to Mr. Wheeler for the consequences.”

It was not a moment to create a disturbance; it was not a scene in which to stand on one’s dignity; otherwise, Mr.

Bohun felt strongly tempted at that crisis to utter one of his crushing remarks, and silence the insolent menial on the spot, but a glance at his brother deterred him. The pallid hue, succeeded by a livid look about his mouth, bore quite an appearance of approaching death, and for words of anger and bitterness to be exchanged in the presence of one whose ears would soon be deaf to all mortal sounds, seemed to Mr. Bohun so fearfully irreverent, that he closed his lips firmly, determined no reproof should escape them.

From that time Sir Felix slept, if sleep it could be called. In an arm-chair by his side sat his brother, watching every breath; on a sofa, at the end of the room, Lady Bohun, sleeping soundly the whole night; in the adjoining room, at a table, reading steadily, and apparently immovably, Mrs. Ponsford. Mr. Bohun watched her from his dark corner, and could discern not the slightest trace of fatigue or drowsiness on her countenance, although, to his certain knowledge, she had sat up with the invalid for the last five nights, nor had he missed her at her post by day.

"The woman must bear a charmed life," thought he, and as he thought, a feeling of sleep irresistibly stole over him; heavier and heavier grew his eyelids—heavier and heavier his head.

He was aroused by the voice of the doctor.

"Mr. Bohun, you must go to your room, and take some rest. You will be completely knocked up. I have sent off both Lady Bohun and her maid, and will take your place."

Mr. Bohun started up.

"You do not mean," he exclaimed, "that you found me asleep? And I was so determined to keep awake!"

"You were sound, for I came in an hour ago, and did not rouse you. As for Sir Felix, his sleep actually seems more natural, and his pulse has rallied—he is awaking."

The gray light of very early morning streamed through the shutters on the ghastly face of the sleeper, who was now beginning to move uneasily, muttering incoherently, and the doctor raised him up.

"The paper—the paper!" he gasped.

Mr. Bohun held up the keys.

"No, no, no!" cried Sir Felix, vehemently, "they have nothing to do with it! *They* only belong to the proof

boxes, full of bonds and deeds. No, no, no!—but the paper—the paper, Guy—I hid it! where did I hide it?—oh! Heaven help me, for I have forgotten! where *did* I hide it? Did I not tell you? did I not tell Wheeler? No? I never told Ponsford, that I swear! Oh! Guy, Guy, where *did* I hide that paper!”

An agony, dreadful to witness, was convulsing every feature.

“Be calm,” said Mr. Bohun, “it cannot be far off; I shall find it, depend upon it; be calm, and remember only that I know of its existence, and shall find it.”

“What a pity,” whispered the doctor to Mr. Bohun, “that you did not possess yourself of it! It was of too great importance to be thus hazarded.”

So thought Mr. Bohun, but, in the present state of his brother, it was impossible to say so. Sir Felix raved and tore at everything within his reach, shook his books to see if he had put it between the leaves, and insisted on every article in the room being moved, “before,” as he hoarsely whispered, “that woman comes back to hunt and find it, for find it she surely will!”

In vain Mr. Bohun assured him that he should not be left—that every corner of the apartment and every atom of the furniture should be searched till the missing paper were found; in vain Mr. Wheeler implored him to be calm, and to give himself time to think where he had concealed it; Sir Felix was now beyond control; it was the fearful wrestle of life with death, and death seemed every instant about to gain the mastery, till all of a sudden Sir Felix sank back exhausted, one word only escaping in a hissing sound between his clenched teeth, the word “Search,” and again and again, at intervals, this word was breathed, till the voice grew lower and lower.

“He sleeps again,” said Mr. Wheeler, fixing his keen and experienced eye upon him; “he sleeps the sleep of unconsciousness. Now, Mr. Bohun, that paper must be found. You have never left the room since Sir Felix told you he had concealed it!”

“My brother told me that *you* had never left him since, and I believe I succeeded you so immediately that I do not think he was alone more than five minutes.”

“How do you mean alone? alone with whom?”

"He was never alone with any one, for, now I remember, Burley sat up last night. He certainly came to call me just as you went away this morning, but that could hardly be called leaving him, for I met him at the door."

"Burley, of course, is not—I mean is one in whom you have entire confidence?"

"As much as in my own soul!" said Mr. Bohun, emphatically.

"Then can you at all account for the singular disappearance of this paper?"

"Certainly. My brother, with the eccentricity that has marked his habits of late, hid it: and, weakened in mind by his state of health, has simply forgotten where. But we shall find it."

Mr. Wheeler looked uneasy.

"I do not like it," said he; "I feel very uncomfortable about it. I know a great deal more as to its contents than you do, my dear sir, and I feel extremely uncomfortable. Until that paper is found, no one should be permitted to leave the house. I beseech you to see that this order is given."

Mr. Bohun smiled, but walked to the bell nevertheless.

"I will tell Burley, since you wish it so much," he observed; "but really I think it is rather an unnecessary precaution. No one feels inclined to go out at this moment, depend upon it."

"Except——" said Mr. Wheeler, pointing to the window as a shadow passed; "except that person, to whom meat and drink, and sleep, seem superfluities. Now where has that woman been?"

"Not far," returned Mr. Bohun, advancing to the window, and watching Ponsford as she paced backwards and forwards: "not far, for she has no bonnet on, you see."

"Humph," said Mr. Wheeler; and at this moment Burley entered.

"Burley," said Mr. Bohun, "it is my wish, for reasons which you will know hereafter, that no one should quit the house this morning without my knowledge. Can you see to this?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Has any one been out already?"

"No one beyond the lawn, sir. It is hardly seven o'clock now."

"I saw Ponsford pass the window just now."

"Did you, sir?" Burley seemed surprised. "She must have got out of one of the windows then, for she never went through the hall. I shall inquire about that, sir."

"You need not," said Mr. Bohun; "for she is without her bonnet, and perhaps wants a breath of fresh air; so say nothing about it, only remember what I said."

Burley turned to go. In passing the bed on which Sir Felix lay, he uttered a loud exclamation and staggered back. In an instant, both the doctor and Mr. Bohun rushed forward, and hastily drew back the curtain. The bright rays of the morning sun now streamed fully in, but they only lighted up the pallid face of death, for the living spirit had passed from its earthly tenement, and the troubled heart of Sir Felix Bohun beat no more.

And then came those dreadful words, customary, but how chilling and mysterious! those words which sum up everything—few and forcible—the words, "He is gone."

CHAPTER XXX.

SILENCE throughout Bohun Court; voices all hushed, and footsteps treading as noiselessly as possible, everything telling of death within the house.

Yet the stately rooms were far from empty. Sir Felix had only lain dead two days, yet the gravel in front of the hall door was cut up by wheels, and almost every room was full. Mr. and Mrs. Blackstone had arrived. Messrs. Bland and Frumpton had arrived. Messrs. Deedes and Grim had arrived. It was in the hands of these latter gentlemen that the last will and testament of Sir Felix was supposed to be, but Messrs. Bland and Frumpton had attended to deliver up some boxes bearing the late

baronet's name, which he had not withdrawn from their care, and having received from Mr. Blackstone an invitation to remain and hear the will read, their anxiety made their acceptance a very ready one.

Yes, every one was anxious now. Anxiety was the predominant feeling in the house, and it sat on every face, save that of the newly-made widow. Her conduct and countenance were equally extraordinary. In the first place, she announced her intention of being present whilst the will was read; in the next, there was an unmoved, tearless composure about her which surprised every soul around her, even her own mother.

"But," as Mrs. Blackstone whispered to Mr. Deedes, "my daughter has such wonderful self-control. She never gives way."

"A most laudable character," was the old lawyer's reply, and Mrs. Blackstone, thinking he said "a most horrible character," turned crimson, and was on the verge of asking an explanation, when her husband set her right, and begged her to go and support Phemy, who had just entered the room—not alone—but followed by Ponsford with a smelling-bottle and a reticule.

Lady Bohun took her seat calmly—she did not look as if she required any support; and no sooner had she settled herself in her chair, than Messrs. Deedes and Grim opened their papers.

It was a curious sight to see the group round the table at that moment, a group consisting of persons all likely to be most deeply interested in the document about to be read. Lady Bohun sat at the head; on one side of her, her father, on the other, Mr. Deedes. Then came Messrs. Grim, Bland, and Frumpton; then Mrs. Blackstone between Messrs. Melville and Wheeler; and lastly, at the end of the table, Sir Guy Bohun.

Behind him stood several of the old servants, present by the express wish of Lady Bohun. As she seated herself, she had looked round with perfect self-possession, though every vestige of colour had left her face; even her lips were white, but her voice clear and firm, as she exclaimed: "I am glad to see all present to whom the contents of this will are of consequence. No one can suppose that I am ignorant of the manner in which my husband has dis-

posed of his property, but still it is satisfactory to me to be surrounded by many who will bear me witness that every line of this document was his own free act."

The only person who ventured to look unfeigned surprise at this speech was Sir Guy Bohun. To him, it sounded strangely like "*Qui s'accuse, s'accuse*," but he said nothing. He sat still and listened, and then came the astounding revelations.

"To his beloved brother Guy, a legacy of ten thousand pounds."

"To his faithful and devoted servant, Mira Ponsford, a legacy of two thousand pounds."

Everybody absolutely started, save the object herself, and her attitude was that of a marble statue.

Then came numerous minor bequests, and, lastly, the summing up.

"To his beloved wife, everything he possessed on earth—money, house, and lands,—not only for her life, but her's, entirely, absolutely, and for ever!"

A dead pause. The muscles round the corners of Euphemia's mouth trembled, quivered, and defied control. The pause became positively painful, and it was Mr. Deedes who broke it, by saying in a hurried way, "I think that is all."

Then another pause, and Mr. Blackstone—her own father—spoke up.

"Gentlemen," said he, his voice full of emotion and agitation, "I confess this arrangement—this will—has taken me quite by surprise. I am so overcome by it, that I do not know how to express myself, particularly feeling most deeply and acutely as I do, and as every one *must* feel, that we all sit in the presence of one who has an unquestionable right to consider himself most bitterly aggrieved, and—and——"

The old man could get no further, but suddenly burst into tears. A movement and a murmur went round the table. Euphemia alone sat perfectly calm and collected, for she had now recovered herself; but Ponsford was bending over her with the smelling-bottle.

Before any one could reply to this address, three of the persons present had risen from their chairs—Mr. Wheeler, Mr. Melville, and Sir Guy Bohun, but it was the former

who got in the first word, and he addressed himself to Mr. Blackstone.

"Your emotion, sir, and your words, both do you honour, and your feelings are, I suspect, shared by *almost* all here present; still I have something to say which, with all due deference to Lady Bohun, and respect to *her* feelings, will, I trust, relieve you of much of the distress which your sense of right and wrong has entailed on you. I beg to state that there exists"—and here his words were slow and emphatic, and his eyes turned towards Lady Bohun—"there exists a codicil to this will!"

"Not to *our* knowledge!" burst in Mr. Deedes, with a flush like a dash of crimson blood upon his forehead.

"To *my certain* knowledge!" continued Mr. Wheeler, in the same measured tone; "and a codicil of much more recent date than that will."

"After-thoughts — unsigned — informal — all waste paper!" panted Deedes and Grim, in turn.

"After-thoughts—*better* thoughts—legally witnessed!" retorted Mr. Wheeler angrily; "signed, sealed, witnessed! call it what you please. But there exists that codicil, a just and proper codicil, and one which will, in one moment, throw over that most nefa——"

"Wheeler, Wheeler!" exclaimed Sir Guy, seizing him by the arm, "be silent, I implore you—let me speak now."

"I am glad of it!" cried Mr. Blackstone, drying his still-streaming eyes. "Yes, Phemy, I am very glad of it, dear child; for, as that good gentleman says, this does seem even to me, your own doating old father, a most nefarious——"

"Papa!" exclaimed Lady Bohun, imperiously and imperatively, "I must entreat you to command any expression of your sentiments for the present. Mr. Wheeler says there is a codicil of later date than this will—who else says so?" and she looked haughtily round the table.

"I say so. I witnessed it," said Mr. Melville.

"And you?" continued Lady Bohun, her eyes resting on Sir Guy.

"I am aware of its existence," he replied, in tones as frigid as ice.

"Then," said she, lowering her large white eyelids with the most cutting scornfulness, "produce it!"

Sir Guy cleared his voice. "I am sorry," said he, "to be placed in so painful and perplexing a position, and I must beg my friend, Mr. Melville, to enter into a full explanation of all the circumstances of this most extraordinary case, for he really knows more about it than I do, since I believe the document in question was executed during my absence from Bohun Court."

"Produce it!" repeated Lady Bohun.

"We shall hope to do so," said Mr. Melville, taking up the subject now himself, and irritated by her manner; and forthwith he detailed minutely every circumstance connected with the execution of the codicil.

"It was a spontaneous resolution, to which, it appears, my late good friend, Sir Felix, had come, after mature thought and deliberation——"

"Not very mature," interrupted Mr. Deedes, "since *our* will only dates three months back."

Mr. Melville proceeded without heeding the impertinence of the remark.

"I had observed repeatedly that something was on his mind, but did not presume to beg his confidence till it was given to me, and this was done unreservedly about a month ago. He gave me the paper to read, and Mr. Wheeler and I, at his earnest request, saw that it was made a valid document. Strange as my story may seem, that document was secreted about either his person or his bed furniture up to within a few hours of his death."

"Then," again repeated Lady Bohun, whose countenance was ashy pale from rage, and whose teeth seemed clenched together, "as I said before, *produce it!*"

"I hope I may be able," replied Mr. Melville, nothing daunted; "but now comes the most singular part of my recital. Sir Felix, from motives which are known to others better than to myself, thought fit to conceal most carefully—day by day, and hour by hour changing its hiding-place—this important paper. Both Sir Guy Bohun and Mr. Wheeler will bear me out in this assertion."

"One moment," interposed Mr. Deedes; "may I request to know if, in this as yet unfound codicil, Bohun Court,

failing male heirs, would become the property of Sir Guy?"

"It was so arranged, and most justly, as I believe all present will allow, considering the large jointure—the immense jointure—left to Lady Bohun," said Mr. Melville.

"I agree," exclaimed Mr. Blackstone, "I agree, sir! Although it is my own daughter, this will is most——."

"Papa!" said a voice, concentrated and low.

"Yes, my child, alas! I agree. And as for a legacy of two thousand pounds to one whose services have been of such short duration, although I do not for a moment wish to detract from her merits—my dear, I *will* be heard!—I repeat that the sum of two thousand pounds to her, from the estate, is monstrous and preposterous! *There!*"

He sat down overpowered.

"Well," said Lady Bohun, "all this is extremely pleasant for me, but I shall not retire. I feel in my proper place, and I shall bear whatever is imposed upon me. Now, gentlemen, if you please, prove the existence of this codicil, by which Sir Guy Bohun becomes possessed of the home that has been left to me, and then I shall withdraw my claims, but not before!"

Sir Guy rose. "Rather than that this should continue, I beg to give it up," said he; "I really cannot endure so unseemly a discussion in a house just stricken by the presence of death."

"Forgive me," said Mr. Bland, now speaking for the first time, "but I do most earnestly hope that Sir Guy Bohun will not withdraw from this inquiry, and my reasons are these: for many years I had the honour of being the legal adviser—I, perhaps, may presume to add, the confidential friend, too, of the late Sir Felix Bohun; for many years I held all his papers, and it was I who drew up his first will, very shortly after this his third and last marriage. Knowing perfectly its contents, the present will, read this day, fills me with astonishment and——and——dismay——"

An uneasy movement ran round the table, and Lady Bohun fidgetted on her chair.

"I wish to cast reflections on no one," he continued;

"I merely wish for justice—justice to be done to one who, I regret to say, shows a strong inclination to refuse to see justice done to himself!"

"Right, right!" murmured Mr. Blackstone; but he was instantly put down by the hasty exclamation of his daughter, who answered Mr. Bland herself.

"You mean then to insinuate, sir, that this will of my late husband's is an unjust one?"

"Madam," was his reply, "it is more than unjust, it is incomprehensible; but on my honour I believe we shall find it in our power to set it aside——" (a sarcastic smile played on the features of Messrs. Deedes and Grim; a flush over those of Lady Bohun, and an expression of supercilious contempt settled on the lips of Ponsford. To Sir Guy Bohun, her countenance was like a scene in a play, and fascinated his gaze, though he could not read it). "Three gentlemen present," added Mr. Bland, "have attested to the existence of a codicil to this will, a codicil so exactly resembling the document which I assisted to execute some years ago, that I have not a doubt but that Sir Felix, under some singular influ—I mean delusion——made this present will, and then repented it. I am sorry to seem unmannerly and rough in my mode of expression, but plain English alone will express the case in point."

"By which, sir, you mean," said Mr. Deedes, "that you believe *our* will to have been executed under a delusion, when Sir Felix was not accountable——"

"No, sir! I did not mean that, but I mean that a will of later date exists. On my soul, I believe it!"

"Then, sir, before we withdraw ours, produce *yours*," cried Mr. Deedes, violently.

"I wish I could, Mr. Deedes; but that is a point at which we have not arrived. We are coming to it, only I feared that Sir Guy Bohun was about to throw it up, disgusted, as well he may be, by the scene through which we are passing. Now, Mr. Melville, will you have the goodness to continue your recital? All await it."

Yes, and with breathless interest, if one might judge from the faces round the table. So Mr. Melville took up his thread again.

"I left off," said he, "at the point where Sir Felix had

been for some days, perhaps longer, in the habit of concealing this codicil, constantly changing its place of concealment, and now I must request Mr. Wheeler to complete the statement."

"I start from where Mr. Melville leaves off," said the doctor; "and I beg to say that I was with Sir Felix at the moment of his death, and am witness that his last sentences were to inform Sir Guy and myself that he had again hidden the paper in a new hiding-place, but that he had forgotten where that was. This thought brought on his death agony—I have no hesitation in saying so—but his very last word was, *Search*."

Mr. Wheeler paused, and Mr. Blackstone hastily exclaimed:—

"And have you done so?"

"We have, as far as searching the room; but I hope we may be permitted now, to extend our search to the farthest possible limits. Will Lady Bohun permit this?"

It was Mr. Blackstone who answered eagerly: "Certainly, certainly, most unquestionably! My dear Phemy, pray say yes. Gentlemen, my daughter is naturally overcome, but I feel sure every possible facility will be afforded you. Phemy, my dear?"

"Papa," said her ladyship, who had been smelling the salts which Ponsford, bending over her, had been administering; "I am not the least overcome. I was fully prepared for this scene, so it cannot affect me much. But as for the request of these gentlemen, since it appears that Bohun Court hangs at present in abeyance——"

"No, madam," interrupted Messrs. Deedes and Grim in one breath; "until the codicil is found, it belongs to your ladyship."

"Then search," cried Euphemia, her eyes flashing on all around her, as she rose majestically and prepared to leave the room; "search the whole house and everything in it; search from the roof to the basement; take even the flooring up if you please, but until the codicil is found, I remain mistress of Bohun Court."

"One moment," said Mr. Melville hastily, "one moment only, Lady Bohun; should the paper not be found *in the room*, we shall be compelled to search the persons of those who were about Sir Felix at the last."

Lady Bohun stood staggered, as it were.

"Who do you mean, who do you suspect?" said she, in a low voice, and deadly pale; "do you infer that any one in this house has secreted it?"

"If you please, my lady," said Burley, instantly advancing, "I was in the room—I hope all my boxes may——" his voice faltered.

"My good Burley," exclaimed Sir Guy, "if any one on earth could find it by looking for it, it would be yourself——but——"

"Oh! master, master!" cried the old man, wringing his hands; "how often I thought it would come to this; didn't I tell you my fears? and now, too, I know why you said, 'Let no one leave the house.'"

"Ha!" burst from the compressed lips of Lady Bohun; "all of you plotting against me?"

"Burley has volunteered to allow a search to be instituted," interrupted Mr. Melville, without heeding the remark; "so that course is clear. The next, or rather the *other* person present, was Mrs. Ponsford."

And he fixed his eye upon her.

"Ponsford!" exclaimed Lady Bohun; "I would as soon suspect myself!"

A peculiar smile crossed the faces of Mr. Bland and Mr. Melville. Both seemed struck with the same thought, but they only smiled, and at that smile, Lady Bohun's pale cheek burned crimson.

"I was not present at the death of Sir Felix Bohun," said a cold, clear, calm voice.

"Am I to understand you object?" asked Mr. Melville.

"Certainly not, sir. Pray search wherever you please, provided only that I am present during the search."

Lady Bohun left the room in the pause that followed these words, and her father rushed after her.

"Phemy! Phemy. my child! give it up!" he cried; "here are three gentlemen all swearing to the existence of another—a later—a much more just and likely will, so give it up, my child, and rest satisfied with your magnificent dowry! Oh! Phemy, my Phemy! don't let your old father go about the world with a blush of dishonour on his cheek. Give it up—it is not too late—let me tell them you give it

up, and let me say you wish to abide by what you know were the intentions of your husband."

"Papa, are you mad?" exclaimed Lady Bohun, whose vehemence, now unchecked by the presence of so many strangers, burst forth with all the greater fury; "have you taken leave of your senses, that you thus urge me to fall into what may be, for aught I know, a trap laid to rob me of my rights?"

"A trap. Phemy! A trap where Mr. Bohun is concerned?" said her father, indignantly.

"Sir Guy Bohun," retorted Euphemia, who seemed to have a bitter sort of pleasure in giving him his new title as soon as possible, and as often as she could (feeling, probably, that he had had little else given to him); "Sir Guy Bohun may not be more immaculate than other disappointed heirs-presumptive! And then again, the insolence of his party—his myrmidons—presuming to insinuate that any one has stolen this codicil of theirs! The scandalous effrontery of daring to try and fix the theft on Ponsford!"

"Ah! my dear, there lies the worst feature in the case; that maid of yours has earned a very questionable reputation for herself, and I have told you all along that you would one day repent the dangerous influence that you have allowed her to gain. Phemy, my child, if you get clear out of this, let that woman go."

In vain Mr. Blackstone, in his simple, honest straightforwardness, pleaded; Lady Bohun only stormed all the more, and whilst this scene was being enacted in her own sitting-room, the rest of the party were searching the premises, the rooms, the furniture, and lastly the boxes of every inmate of the house. Not an article remained unturned, and still no codicil!

Then came the question, had any one left the house that day or the succeeding days? Had letters been sent to the post, and if so, by whom? This last idea was Mr. Wheeler's.

Yes; letters had been sent every day, but only in Sir Guy Bohun's handwriting. Lady Bohun had written none. For the presence of her father and mother she had telegraphed. Then who had taken the message to the telegraph office? Burley.

"That is satisfactory," said Sir Guy.

But who had taken the letters to the post? William, the stable helper.

Mr. Wheeler looked at Sir Guy, as much as to say, "Is that equally satisfactory?"

"I would not believe that man on his oath; we are foiled; we have, in fact, lost our clue," was Sir Guy's answer to the look of inquiry, "so do not question him on the subject."

And now they had exhausted all their resources. Everything that could be done had been done, and the crest-fallen *ci-devant* lawyers of the late Sir Felix Bohun were compelled to retire discomfited, and yield the field to the triumphant Deedes and Grim.

The story of Sir Felix having executed a codicil, and hidden it, and forgotten where, Lady Bohun now laughed to scorn. No matter to her that three gentlemen, honourable and trustworthy, swore they had seen it, and two had witnessed it; it was not to be found, and that, with her, was equivalent to its non-existence; so, besides laughing the story to scorn, she soon flatly announced her disbelief of it altogether.

And who heard her? Few who cared, save the neighbourhood, for all the old servants gave warning in a body, the moment they heard that Sir Guy was no longer master of Bohun Court; so, within six weeks after the death of Sir Felix, Mrs. Ponsford was sent up to town to choose new servants, and she brought down a whole bevy, her own position being now elevated to that of housekeeper and upper lady's-maid, my lady having a young and humble French girl as a subordinate to wait on her, and obey Mrs. Ponsford in all things.

As for the neighbourhood, they all left their cards of condolence, and then there was a long lull, during which they had leisure to watch the proceedings of the widow, and judge how deeply she mourned, or how little she missed, him over whom a stately monument was standing in Bohun churchyard. They had leisure, also, to wish matters had been otherwise. Many wished another in her place, and many made no secret of the fact that all the hearts round Bohun Court had gone away with Sir Guy Bohun, who had left the neighbourhood for good.

CHAPTER XXXI.

MONTHS have passed since the stately monument was raised over the remains of Sir Felix Bohun. How many months?—thirteen; just one over the twelvemonth, and now let us look again at Bohun Court.

But is that Bohun Court? There is the wide lawn—there are the grass terraces—there stand the proud old oaks, and cedars, and chestnuts, and the beautiful groups of elms here and there—and the deer are feeding under the trees as usual, and the lake lies glittering peacefully in the sun—everything looks as it used to do, but where is the gray old house? where the darker gray towers, and the projections of every shape, up which ivy used to creep and wind, and cling like a living creature?

On the lawn, where the gray old house once stood, stands a house precisely the same in size, in shape, in towers, battlements, and projections, but gray no longer. It stands there now, clad in a modern dress, glaring like a large spot through the trees, so as to be seen for miles and miles. Bohun Court has been whitewashed!

But it is thirteen months since the death of Sir Felix Bohun. Time enough for all his whims, or fancies, or wishes to be forgotten, just as completely as himself, and the lady of Bohun Court has other advisers now.

On the lake there is now an airy little boat with an awning. Beneath that awning, which protects them from a hot autumn sun, sit two figures. They have pushed off from the shore, and have been in deep conversation for the last two hours.

The lady is dressed in a suit of the most silvery gray, with costly ornaments of jet. She is tired of her sables, but she thinks gray is becoming, so is white and black, so she has a white silk parasol with a jet handle elaborately carved like coral. She wears no hat—a Spanish mantilla is quite enough for such a warm day, and much more becoming (so she is told), and she never tans or freckles, and if she did, it would not be unbecoming (so somebody tells her).

And now they are talking.

"But, Sydney, people will say it is so soon!"

"Soon, Phemy!—a year and a half soon?"

"Only a year and a month, Sydney."

"Why do you count in that provokingly precise way? To me it seems ten years."

"Nevertheless, it is but one year and one month, and even if the neighbourhood do not exclaim, I am sure papa will. He was very angry the other day when he saw me in this gray dress, and when you plagued me into wearing that white muslin with the deep hems, he sent me upstairs again, and made me change it."

"Well, really, Phemy, though I give you credit for as much youth and beauty as can well fall to the share of one individual, still I did not think you were quite such a child as you make yourself out."

"Oh! you may laugh as much as you please, but you will find when it comes to the point that it is all truth. Papa will be furious, and the neighbourhood scandalized."

"Then I may as well go abroad with my regiment instead of selling out. Perhaps, by the time I come back—some ten or fifteen years hence—you will consider a proper time to have elapsed."

"Nonsense, Sydney."

"Plain sense, Phemy mine. My heart is very sick, and you know what is said to cause that heart-sickness. But, to put an end to these perpetual discussions, as well as my own misery, hear my final decision, Phemy. If you do not here, on this spot, in this boat, on this most lovely summer's evening, give me my answer, and that a favourable one, I drop these oars over the boat's side, and then here we must sit until Mrs. Blackstone, like a distracted hen, comes seeking her duckling, and finds it where Mr. Blackstone will assuredly punish it for being."

Phemy pouted, laughed, blushed, and turned her head away. Captain Aylmer pressed his suit, and she did not refuse to listen, but still the final answer was not given.

"I must think it over—I will see about it," said her ladyship, with a hesitation rather incomprehensible to her cousin.

"But you have thought it over, or told me you would, so very often, Phemy."

"Yes—but there are more people to be consulted than myself—more than one."

"Your mother is favourable—your father you can talk over, surely."

"Yes; but——"

"Beyond those two, on whom, after all, you bestow a power which is mere courtesy, you have to ask no one's leave."

"No; but——"

"Phemy, will you marry me?"

"Some day."

"Name that day."

"No, that, indeed, I cannot."

"Then I will name it myself. This is the last week in September. I will give you till the last week in October."

Lady Bohun threw herself back, and laughed heartily.

"Thank you. Could you not give me a day or two longer?"

"Phemy—the oars! Shall it be November, then?"

"No, I will not be married in November."

"Name your own month, your own day, and your own hour, but name it. No more thinking it over, Phemy. Say the word at once, and let us go home. The dews are rising. Look at the lawn covered with a white vapour. Phemy, we *must* go home."

He said "home" very naturally; it came quite easily from his lips as though it were a familiar sound to them, and so, in fact, it was. Captain Aylmer had been a constant inmate of Bohun Court ever since Euphemia had been its mistress. All the alterations were of his suggestion—all the improvements (?) of his planning (the white-washing of the gray walls to wit).

But there were other residents besides beneath that wide roof. Great changes had taken place in the domestic arrangements of Mr. and Mrs. Blackstone, for, thinking Euphemia too young to be alone, they had made up their minds, after much sorrowful consideration, to let The Laurels, in all its brightness and beauty, and take up their abode within the sombre walls of their daughter's stately and now splendid home.

It was not the life they liked, nor the place to please them, but they felt it their duty, and so turned a deaf ear

to many broad hints thrown out by Lady Bohun as to their mean opinion of her conduct and discretion.

Mrs. Blackstone was very much the same sort of old lady who used to trot about the dainty walks of The Laurels, and count over her snowdrops and crocuses day by day, but upon Mr. Blackstone there had come a great and sudden change, and even his daughter hardly knew him at times. There was a restlessness and nervousness constantly present in his manner, which gave him the appearance of always expecting something to happen. He went about amongst the society of the neighbourhood with an alarmed, downcast, half-uneasy sort of look, and he had a habit of starting, when suddenly addressed, which often attracted attention and made people wonder.

There was a skeleton in that old man's heart, the skeleton of the lost codicil, which haunted him from room to room in that gloomy house and walked by his side wherever he moved. It glared before his eyes as he sat at his daughter's glittering table, and, as he ate off the silver plates, which it was her delight to use in common every day, it seemed to stand whispering in his ear, "Not her's—not her's!"

His belief in the existence of that will, or perhaps rather his firm belief that it did once exist, was still as strong as on the memorable day when Mr. Melville, Mr. Wheeler, and Sir Guy Bohun, all announced that there was such a document; and he, who throughout a long life honourably spent in business, had never had a breath cast upon the brightness of his fair name, now felt as if every finger pointed at his child as an usurper, and at himself and her mother as accessories in her iniquity, for iniquitous was the only word the old man ever felt was strong enough to express the terrible light in which he looked upon the whole affair.

He could not sleep at night. He could not rest by day.

"My dear," he would say to his wife, over and over again, "I can never die happy till I find out what became of that paper. I was going to say—and I sometimes think, too—that I shall never be able to die at all until the mystery is solved."

"Dear Mr. Blackstone, I wish you would not fret so about it. You know the state Sir Felix was in—you re-

member his delusions—Phemy always says it was a delusion altogether.”

“Happy for Phemy that she can thus quiet her conscience, my dear. *I* cannot. And as to delusions, Sir Felix may have had them, but that does not apply to Mr. Bohun—to Sir Guy.”

“He never saw the paper.”

“But Wheeler and Mr. Melville did.”

“Yes, some weeks before—not up to the death of Sir Felix. He had opportunities to destroy it fifty times over between the execution of it and his death.”

“Then some one must have found or seen the remnants. No, no! that is Phemy’s reasoning—Phemy’s *salve* as I call it! No, no; had Sir Felix been strong enough to wander about this great house, he might have concealed it where many a generation might never find it; but a sick man, tied to his room, almost to his bed, incapable of walking three yards without assistance—not he! I believe he wrote it—I believe he hid it—I believe its hiding-place was discovered—and I believe, honestly and solemnly, that it was made away with! how or where, God only knows; and all I can say is, whoever did it, may God forgive her!”

To the last word of this ejaculation, Mrs. Blackstone always thought it prudent to turn a deaf ear. She well knew with what her husband’s remarks on the subject generally ended, and so she always prepared a little cough to drown the last word. She had a sort of a dread of hearing it—of feeling that she lived under the same roof with the “her” denominated—that she breathed the same poisoned air—bent under the same yoke—bowed beneath the same strange, insensible influence.

But Ponsford still flourished—flourished like an upas tree—standing alone in her glory, and utterly indifferent to the opinions of any one around her. Her manner has undergone some little change since her accession; she is more matronly, more supercilious in her silent *hauteur*, and she walks about, giving orders with an air which puts even the dignity of Lady Bohun to shame.

Lady Bohun is graceful; Mrs. Ponsford grand. The former commands; the latter rules.

And now the couple who were sitting in the boat have come in.

Mrs. Ponsford awaited the return of Lady Bohun in her room—waited to dress her for dinner—and waited in a state of considerable displeasure, for Mrs. Ponsford was not accustomed to be kept waiting, neither did she approve that that liberty should be taken where her tea was concerned; consequently, she received Lady Bohun with marked displeasure.

"When your ladyship catches your death of cold, you will repent these hours spent sitting in that boat on the lake," were the words that greeted the offender.

"Hours, Ponsford?—more likely an hour."

"Much more like three, my lady. It is now a quarter to seven. I was in this room at six."

"Dear me, Ponsford, I am sorry I have kept you waiting so long! Goodness! I shall never be ready in a quarter of an hour, unless I hurry to death."

"Your ladyship cannot be dressed in a quarter of an hour. I have put off the dinner until half-past seven."

"Oh!" Lady Bohun said nothing—looked nothing. She did not dare. But she exclaimed, after a pause, "Where is Estelle? Somebody must tell papa—he will be so fidgety——"

"I have already told Mr. and Mrs. Blackstone. Now, if you please, my lady; you have no time to sit in a reverie *here*; which dress is it to be?—the white?"

"Oh, no! Papa disliked it. My black net again. But why should I trouble you, Ponsford? Where is Estelle?"

"I dismissed Estelle. I intended to dress your ladyship myself this evening, for I was sure you would be chilled. How any one in their senses can go and sit in the damp of the evening, in a boat, on a lake surrounded by willows, surprises me. It is like madness; it is folly, to say the least of it."

"Never mind, my excellent friend," returned Lady Bohun, trying to laugh. (Gall were the words of that insolent menial—very wormwood her unanswerable reproaches.) "Never mind! perhaps it will not last much longer!"

"I should hope not," was Ponsford's reply.

"Why?" asked Euphemia sharply; "what does it signify to anybody?"

"It signifies to yourself, my lady," was the cool retort, "not only as regards your health, but also as for what people say."

"Ah!" exclaimed Lady Bohun, with a sort of triumphant bitterness, "*I flatter myself few people care less what people say than I do!*"

"I do not agree with you, my lady. If you heard all the remarks I do, you would not be quite so indifferent; indeed, they would annoy you extremely."

"Then don't tell me—don't repeat them," said Lady Bohun, with some temper.

But Ponsford *did* mean to repeat them. It would not have suited her at that moment to be silenced, for she was out of temper herself. So she said,

"Yet I am not sure but that it is much better your ladyship should know, than not. It is impossible that things should go on at Bohun Court as they do, and people not take any notice. It is early days, my lady, and people *will* say so, though I were to go the whole round of the village and neighbourhood, and say it is only a cousin!"

She paused, but Euphemia spoke not a syllable. This was not the first time by many that she had had to listen, silently, to similar language. Her cheek might burn and her heart might beat, but speak—either to rebuke, to deny, or to excuse—she durst not! And well did her tormentor know this, so she continued,

"No one would believe me. If the truth could be told at once, your ladyship's good name would suffer much less than it does now, when every one looks upon it in the light of—a—a—"

"A what?" cried Euphemia, who felt as if she could stand but very little more.

Ponsford hesitated—yes, even *she* hesitated! but she had a bold stroke to play (she had her ends to gain), so she played it with as high a hand as she could.

"My lady, there is a great prejudice in the eyes of the world against attentions paid before a certain time has elapsed—to—to a young widow. People about here make no secret of saying what they think, and it is no use my contradicting—"

"I gave you no authority——" began Euphemia, half choking.

"No, my lady; but I cannot listen in silence to reflections cast upon the mistress I serve——"

Euphemia bent her head in a sort of acknowledgment, but she was too indignant still, to be smoothed down without another layer of flattery.

"—— and so I now keep within the immediate precincts of Bohun Court altogether—at all events until I can say openly, her ladyship is her own mistress, free to regulate her own time and her own actions, and free to make her own choice."

Without a moment's hesitation, Lady Bohun, hastily snatching up her gloves, turned upon her attendant.

"Say it, Ponsford," said she, with her eyes flashing, though they rested on nothing but the usual downcast eyelids (for Mrs. Ponsford very rarely looked you full in the face), "say it as soon as you please; you may even say, if you choose, that my choice is made."

She left the room without waiting to see the effect of her words. She descended the staircase with a heart beating so violently that each pulsation amounted to pain, yet she had a proud, though secret, satisfaction in knowing she had commanded herself before Ponsford.

Well, too well, she knew that that woman might insult her with impunity; her only comfort was, in thinking that she could so control her feelings as to blind the vampire—thus draining her heart's blood—to the fact that she felt at all. Full well she knew that she was in her power. One word from Ponsford, and Sir Guy Bohun would be justified in a course to which he had as yet repeatedly declined to stoop, namely, to try the validity of the will. One word from Ponsford, and the world would have to judge in whom most faith would be placed—in the servant, who swore to the undue influence which had defrauded the direct heir, or in the wife who—in full possession of the immense fortune and estates—swore that the servant had, for the sake of her two thousand pounds' legacy, intimidated the old man into doing what he *had* done.

Lady Bohun had sense enough to know it would go against her, and so she was silent; but often and often, in moments of extreme bitterness, did her old father's oft-repeated tale of his younger days rise up in her memory, and, with a sigh of exquisite anguish, she would breathe

in the hidden depths of her once high heart, his well-known *refrain*, "No tyranny like the tyranny of a servant!" What, then, must have been, to so proud a spirit, the reflection that this was the tyranny of a servant who had a *right* to tyrannize?—a servant in whose power she had wittingly placed herself? to whose mercy she had, in sober senses, sold herself?

No. There was no help for it; she must bear it, most likely to the last day of her life, and not only bear it smilingly, but tremble while she smiled, for she knew not from day to day, or hour to hour, whether she might not even then be betrayed.

Dame Euphemia Bohun trusted Mrs. Mira Ponsford with everything she had in the world—trusted her, petted her, cajoled her at times, feared her, and dreaded her with a mortal dread—but as to having *confidence* in her?—no, *that* she had none!

So down she hurried to the drawing-room, not waiting to see the effect of her words, because she had an idea that Ponsford might not be pleased—might oppose her second marriage—might not find it so convenient to have a gay, thoughtless, wild young spendthrift at the head of affairs.

But her own mind was made up (as far as she was mistress of it). Unless absolutely prevented, she intended to marry Captain Sydney Aylmer, and that evening she meant to tell him so.

CHAPTER XXXII.

SIR GUY BOHUN lived in London now. He had chosen a quiet, gloomy, dark, and dull street, one end opening directly into Hyde Park, as his town residence, and had thus attained the long wished-for object of his ambition, a *pied-à-terre*.

He liked that sad and narrow street; it suited his frame of mind. He entered very little into society, and the

circles he frequented were much of the same character as the street he had chosen—quiet and dull; but this, too, suited his frame of mind. He began to feel, or to fancy, he was growing old, a consciousness which sobers the merriest of us, so that gayer circles would not have been congenial to his temperament.

Reserved at the best of times, he was now more so than ever—a sort of haughty shyness which made him look (so Miss Maynard observed) as if he owed the world a grudge.

But there were some houses in which he *did* dine, and on one of these occasions, at the house of an old friend, he was agreeably surprised by hearing the names of Admiral and Miss Maynard announced.

Beyond casual meetings, and brief out-of-door greetings, he had had no opportunity of conversing with these once-familiar neighbours since the death of Sir Felix; therefore, it was with a feeling of pleasure, for some time unknown to him, that he found himself next to Miss Maynard at dinner.

He soon discovered that time had also wrought changes in even that gay, free nature. Miss Maynard was quieter, much more subdued, than in the days when she was the life and soul of Bohun Court, though the Admiral's voice still drowned every sound but its own.

Sir Guy never heard of Bohun Court now. It was as if a gulf yawned between it and him, and a gulf across which he was not even privileged to look, much less to speak; consequently, when Miss Maynard began naturally to talk of affairs connected with her own home, she trod very near that cherished ground, and, at last, fairly asked him, "Is it painful to you to hear anything about Bohun Court?"

Sir Guy was glad the plunge was made.

"On the contrary," was his answer; "I shall listen with as much interest as though I had a right to be interested."

"Tell me first, have you heard anything?"

"Nothing. Against idle gossip I close my ears, but I should look upon no communication of yours in that light."

"Nor is it, I can assure you."

"But I augur from your manner, that you have some news to tell me?"

"I suppose I have, since I can see by yours that you know nothing."

"Nothing, indeed," said Sir Guy, sighing heavily; "and perhaps if I were wise, I should ask you to leave me in blissful ignorance; still, my heart sometimes yearns for tidings of the old place."

"You would hardly know it now," said Miss Maynard, in a low voice.

"All the better," replied Sir Guy quickly; "if I were ever to see it again, and see it utterly transformed, I could better bear it, than to revisit it and recognise every stone and every tree."

"Rest happy, then, Sir Guy. The place is utterly transformed."

"What?" he exclaimed, suddenly turning towards her, "timber cut down?"

"Yes—many and many an old friend gone for ever."

"No additions, of course, to the house?"

"No—not that."

"But the inside?"

"Very much altered. Most of the rooms changed. The billiard-room is now the dining-room—the drawing-room scarcely ever entered. *Your* den is Lady Bohun's boudoir."

"That I always expected. Her ladyship failed to eject, though I knew she would succeed me. Well—then the ivy? Have the walls been cleared of that?"

"Completely."

"And what else? I see something more behind those considerate eyelids of yours. Raise them fearlessly—let me read the sword-stroke—what else has been done?"

"What you always dreaded—at least, so I fancy—remembering as I do the thrill of indignation with which you once heard suggested, an improvement which has now been adopted."

Sir Guy drew in his lips. "I can guess," said he; "yes, I can guess, and I am not sorry. I remember there was one turn in the line of railway from which I used to look down into the dark valley, and see the knot of tall cedars which told where Bohun Court stood."

"Well," said Miss Maynard, "you may look down into the valley still, but you will not see that landmark, or rather that housemark, of cedars; but if you have a companion in the opposite compartment, you will most likely be asked——"

"What?"

"To whom does that large *white* house belong?"

Sir Guy gave a low, stifled groan. "And yet," said he, after a pause, "I am glad, very glad, for the reason I gave you. However, what is it to me? Why should I sigh, or grieve, or care? Yet I like to hear all about it. Is this what you had to tell me, Miss Maynard?"

"No, indeed!" said the young lady, trying to laugh, "I did not intend to make our host's dinner-table so dismal. We have wandered very far from the original point. The news I had to tell you concerns Lady Bohun herself. Can you guess that, too?"

Sir Guy looked very grave.

"I see you do," she continued; "and I half wish it had not been I who brought the distasteful intelligence first under your notice."

"I must have heard it, or seen it, some time or other—it little matters."

"Ah, but so soon!"

"What else could be expected?"

"I assure you the neighbourhood thought better of her. We are all infinitely disgusted, and the Admiral declares he shall not return home until after it is over."

"You do not mean," exclaimed Sir Guy, "that it is to take place immediately?"

"I do indeed—within two months; and though I do not like you to think I am the retailer of all the county scandal, still whispers do go round, and people do say, that if the bridegroom-elect were not to announce publicly his prompt intentions, his creditors would not be quite so patient as they have suddenly become."

"Poor wretch!" murmured Sir Guy, as if thinking aloud.

"Which?" asked Miss Maynard, slyly.

After dinner, when the gentlemen rejoined the party in the drawing-room, Sir Guy Bohun instinctively made his way towards Miss Maynard.

"I have been talking to the Admiral," said he, "and I am sorry and shocked to hear the general reports of the state of Captain Aylmer's affairs. Can Mr. Blackstone know that he is over head and ears in debt?"

"And that the depth of that debt, which covers his handsome head and ears, will exhaust about three years of Lady Bohun's income! No! depend upon it, Papa Blackstone has been kept in profound ignorance of the interesting fact; and I am told, on the best authority, namely, the old lady, that when her husband anxiously seeks to meddle in the affairs of his daughter and his nephew, they both tell him, in polite words, that they are no business of his!"

"So she flings herself into the abyss without a hand stretched out to save her?"

"One hand did try—not perhaps to save, but to prevent—one hand, whose owner's motives generally are somewhat questionable. Mrs. Ponsford—our dear friend, the vampire—does not like the match!"

"Upon what grounds does she disapprove?"

"Singularly enough, upon plausible grounds; that Captain Aylmer will play ducks and drakes with my lady's money, and that she will not stay and see it done."

"Then she is to leave?"

"She says she will. We shall see. I do not know how it will be arranged, but I somehow doubt her ever letting go her hold of Lady Bohun. She makes too good a thing of it."

All this was only what Sir Guy Bohun had expected to hear, whenever he *did* hear anything of Bohun Court; it was only what he had always anticipated.

"It is the story finished," said he; "and, like a badly-written novel, it has finished exactly as we expected."

"Don't say finished yet," replied Miss Maynard; "as far as my judgment goes, we are only, as yet, in the middle of it. But as I have told you all that I know upon the subject, I will not wear it threadbare, but ask you something new. Have you been introduced to that frightened-looking little woman in rose-colour, talking to our host?"

"Our opposite neighbour at dinner, who made a succession of pyramids of bread-crumbs all dinner-time?"

"Did you really observe her so closely? Well, do you

know that you were yourself an object of the most intense interest to her?"

"I, Miss Maynard? and why so?"

"Do you know who she is? and that pale, severe husband of hers?"

"I was not introduced to them."

"I thought you might have caught the name—Mr. and Mrs. Charles Topham."

"The name seems familiar; but I suppose I am growing stupid, as well as old; where have I heard it?"

"The Tophams? Mr. and Mrs. Charles Topham, Lady Mary, and old Lady Merivale?"

Sir Guy struck his hand on his forehead with a gesture of vexation at his stupidity.

"What must they think of me, when we knew Lady Mary so well?"

But it was now too late in the evening to repair his fault of omission; the guests were dispersing, and Mr. and Mrs. Topham were going to another party, and made their exit hastily, so that Sir Guy saw them depart, believing that he had seen the last of them, and regretting it as one of the many lost opportunities of his life, small as the loss was; however, in this he was mistaken.

The following morning, whilst he was out walking, taking his *constitutional*, a gentleman called and left a card, with a message that he would call again.

It was Mr. Charles Topham.

"What can he want?" thought Sir Guy Bohun, for the proceeding was irregular, seeing that it was Sir Guy who should have taken the initiative, and he puzzled himself for some time over the question.

For one individual to take the trouble of calling upon another twice in one day betokened something unusually important. If Sir Guy called at a friend's house twice in six months, he considered the act meritorious. But then he suddenly recollected what Miss Maynard had said—that all dinner-time he had been an object of the most intense interest to Mrs. Charles.

"In the name of goodness, why and wherefore?" thought Sir Guy again to himself; and all that afternoon he was fidgetty and nervous, until, at a late hour, the expected guest arrived.

Mr. Topham was not a person to keep an audience in suspense. He was a small, thin, dark, and sallow man, with a rapidity of utterance and an abruptness of manner which was calculated to flurry and confuse even the most-composed listener; and no sooner was he in Sir Guy's presence, than he rushed into his subject with merely a brief apology for breaking through the rules enjoined by strict etiquette.

"But, Sir Guy," he exclaimed, "we are fellow-sufferers; you will excuse me for saying so, but I look upon you as a fellow-victim. You must forgive my using the term."

Sir Guy Bohun was mystified and looked the surprise he felt. Mr. Topham saw it, for nothing escaped his eye, and continued,

"When I had the pleasure of meeting you last night," said he, "old days recurred vividly to my mind——"

"So they did to mine," interrupted Sir Guy, "and I reproached myself for having been so remiss as not to introduce myself to you as an old friend of your family."

"The fault was mine, Sir Guy," persisted his excitable visitor; "for I knew I was to meet you; but I have been for some time in such a fever of anxiety, that really when the moment arrived, I lost the courage to address you, feeling, as I did, that if I opened my lips at all in conversation with you, it could but be on one subject—the subject which I think you will say is common between us both, because, as I before observed, Sir Guy, I regard you as a fellow-victim."

Sir Guy had not a word to say to this strange address. He could only bow in silence, and wait an explanation, whilst a passing thought occurred to him that surely no friend would have invited him to meet at dinner a man bereft of his senses, otherwise——.

But Mr. Topham merely took breath, and then set off again

"I have thought the matter over long and carefully, Sir Guy; my brother and I have spent days and nights in turning the subject in our minds, marvelling if we could in any way find a loophole; we have consulted lawyers after lawyers, in the vain hope of finding some redress, but we have been obliged at last to withdraw into our own homes, baffled, disappointed men, doomed to chew the

bitter cud with only this atom of consolation, which is, that we *know* ourselves to be victimized, though we cannot help it."

And here, a pause gave Sir Guy an opportunity of edging in a word.

"The painful circumstances to which you, of course, allude," he began, "are well known to me, as you may easily suppose, from our long friendship with both poor Lady Merivale and your sister-in-law, Lady Mary——."

"Of course they are!" burst in Mr. Topham; "of course, you know perfectly how completely my brother was taken by surprise by the extraordinary and unaccountable bequests contained in Lady Mary's will; but, still more, how utterly overwhelmed he was when, upon the death of Lady Merivale, valuable plate, property, and immense sums of money were left away from him, although all his married life he had been induced to believe himself sole heir, whether Lady Mary survived her mother or not. All this, Sir Guy, you know well; but what I came to bring before your notice, what I came to tell you, firmly persuaded of the fact and doubting if it has struck you in a similar light, is, that we are victims, Sir Guy! we are fellow-victims — and we are victimized by the same power!"

"By that woman, Ponsford?" said Sir Guy, quietly raising his eyes.

"You are right—you have hit it; by that infamous woman, whom the finger of the law has as yet been unable to touch! But, Sir Guy, our day may yet come; if I have been able to arouse in you the same suspicions that fill my own mind, I may possibly be able, also, to persuade you to assist me by your co-operation?"

"For what good?" asked Sir Guy, now seeing clearly at what his visitor was driving; "what possible advantage can arise from our stirring in a matter in which we have nothing but suspicions to stand upon?"

"Then you have also your suspicions?"

"I did not say so; but, from what I gather from yourself, Mr. Topham, *you* have nothing else!"

"But I think I have! that is what brought me here to-day. I think I can lay hold of facts now, or, at all events,

of *one* fact, and if I could only secure your assistance to back up my suspicions——”

“Ah!” interrupted Sir Guy Bohun, “as I said before, suspicions will not do. Lawyers will grasp a fact with pleasure, but a suspicion serves only to eat into our own hearts.”

“You are beginning to see it in my light!” cried Mr. Topham, charmed at the tone of bitterness which the voice of Sir Guy assumed as he uttered these words; “and now let me tell you that I have great hope that I *have* a fact to stand upon. My wife—you saw her last night——perhaps you did not observe that she is a particularly timid person——she is of a very nervous temperament, so much so that till now the very mention of that night when Lady Merivale died, and when she saw, through the half-open door, that woman Ponsford holding the pen in the dying old lady’s hand, has been sufficient to throw her into hysterics! Now, however, she has somewhat recovered, and by dint of constant persuasion and remonstrance, my brother and I have almost extorted from her a promise that she will, if necessary, come forward and swear to that fact!——observe, I say, *fact*—this is my fact!——so that I now propose going to our lawyer, old Bland, and asking him his opinion, and if he advises our acting, then, as far as my wife’s evidence is concerned, we will seize her in the humour, and strike whilst the iron is hot.”

Mr. Topham again paused, breathless; but Sir Guy did not take up the thread immediately, for he did not quite see why *he* was made the depository of this vehement story; neither could he quite understand how he was required to assist; neither did he quite comprehend how they were fellow-victims, except that, perhaps, the world saw in both himself and Mr. Topham, men who had foolishly built expectations which destiny had not realized.

After a momentary hesitation, he put these thoughts into words, but, like a cat springing on a mouse, Mr. Charles Topham pounced upon his doubts.

“My dear Sir Guy, our cases are strangely similar; pardon me, but I have considered it a duty to acquaint myself with every word of the will of your late brother, and I there see that the person most benefited by the

codicil of Sir Felix is Ponsford! ergo, she had a hand in it."

Sir Guy laughed, in spite of himself.

"Yes," continued Mr. Topham, "had *only* Lady Bohun benefited, I might have had my doubts, for we all know the power a young wife may gain; but this woman has actually made her fortune by it! perhaps she has not finished even now! perhaps she may go on till she gets more and more, and very likely she will; but what I ask is, is it to be allowed to continue? Are we to permit it? Are we to submit in passive silence?"

"I must," replied Sir Guy, "for I have no alternative. I have nothing in *my* case tangible."

"But I think *we* have," said Mr. Topham.

"I begin to think so, too," returned Sir Guy; "but if you will not consider me very impertinent in making use of a very homely phrase, will you allow me to say, that I would not advise you to bark unless you are very sure you can bite. Did Lady Merivale ever make a will varying very greatly with the codicil which dispersed the property so widely?"

"Most assuredly she did! we have it in our possession. So did Sir Felix."

"True; but my brother unhappily forgot where he concealed his fresh one."

"Which means," said Mr. Topham, with as much indignant warmth as though the case were his own, "that you never found it! Ah! villainy! villainy from first to last! Do you think, Sir Guy, that he had not good reasons for finding it necessary to conceal it at all?"

"That is not a question in point now," replied Sir Guy, quietly, "it was never found."

"I stand corrected, and beg your pardon," said Mr. Topham, "only it all bears strongly upon my case, you must allow. It was never found. No. Nor will it be, as long as that woman lives——"

"No—honestly," interrupted Sir Guy, "I exonerate her there. I do not know what the world may say, but it was my brother who, with his own hands, either concealed or destroyed (in the weakness of approaching death) that will. Ponsford may have had a hand in the will which

has been proved, and is now in force, but with the lost one, I——"

He was apparently going to assert more than, on consideration, he felt he could conscientiously do, and stopped suddenly.

"Well, but to return to our point," resumed Mr. Topham; "what I wish is, that, doubly armed with *your* story to add weight to *ours*, we should all go to Bland, and ask his advice as to whether we are not justified in taking some fresh steps for the recovery of our rights."

"Bland has all the particulars of *my* story at his fingers' ends," said Sir Guy, with a smile; "I believe he grieves over it more than I do; and as to its adding weight to yours, it will hardly do that; it will but add further proof of the extraordinary pitch to which the influence of a confidential servant can be carried—nothing more. I confess my own feeling is, let Ponsford alone. She has shown skill enough to carry her points, so, depend upon it, she has art enough to conceal her means if foul, and to baffle her pursuers should the law attempt to follow her windings."

"Still you have no objection my commenting to Bland on the singular coincidences that exist between your case and mine?"

"Not the slightest. I wish it may do you any good. But about Lady Mary Topham's will?—I forget the particulars."

* "Her first will had been in my brother's possession ever since they married. Her settlements required that she should make one, and she did so very early in their married life, leaving him everything. Imagine then his feelings, when, after her death, this woman, this detestable confidential servant, this insidious Ponsford, glides noiselessly into his room with her cold, glassy face——"

"How like her!" thought Sir Guy.

"——glides up to his side, and lays down a paper before him which proved to be his wife's *last* will! and in this, a *suite* of pearls so large, so pure, so perfect, that money could scarcely buy them, was left as a legacy to the woman herself! A set so rare from their peculiar shape that my brother believed them matchless, left to this creature, who,

of course, could only want them to sell, one by one. Ask yourself, Sir Guy, is it probable or possible that Lady Mary would, without coercion, have done this?"

"Coercion is another point not tangible in our case," said Sir Guy; "you did not prove coercion."

"Alas, no! But that was a dead loss to my brother of something like three thousand pounds; then, the hand-writing of the will was so unlike my sister's usual firm style; yet unhappily, even here we were foiled, for her own mother swore to it: lastly, who turned Lady Merivale against us, except that woman?—who but she could have dictated the disposal of old plate and jewels of which only ourselves knew the existence? yet it was all willed away!"

"And this is the will you are now proposing to set aside?"

"To prove a forgery, my dear Sir Guy; to prove that no living hand signed it."

"But there were witnesses?"

"Yes, two; one, the young doctor to whom a good deal was left, so of course *his* tongue was quiet enough; the other, who do you think? You will never guess. A young man who was just then acting as footman in place of a sick servant—a young fellow, half boy, half man, who happened to be at hand in the hurry of the moment, and whom Ponsford herself had engaged *pro tem.*, as he was doing nothing at Bohun Court just then—that young groom of yours. Sir Guy."

"William!" exclaimed Sir Guy, now feeling startled for the first time; "impossible!"

"Perfectly true. Well then, to make my story more singular, Ponsford was not Lady Merivale's servant at the time of the old lady's death—she was *yours*—I mean she was Lady Bohun's—yet she never left that poor old woman long alone; she pretended her own maid did not understand her; she was there night and day, constantly, and we all used to say what an indulgent mistress Lady Bohun must be, for actually the woman was more in our house than hers."

Sir Guy's face was now hidden in his hand. Even his unsuspecting nature at last saw something like a plot, and he was trying to remember dates, and put things together.

He had been absent from town the whole time himself, but he distinctly recollected William's being sent for, and thinking at the time that it was to assist Sir Felix in his increasing infirmities.

"And it is this will," said he, at last, "that you mean to prove invalid?"

"We mean to try it again; we have tried once—tried to prove it a forgery, but failed; we shall now try it on other grounds. Sir Guy, I come back to where I began. The woman who has so injured us, has also deeply injured you."

"This we cannot prove. *You* have both facts and suspicions. I doubt if *I* can say I have even suspicions."

"In your heart you *must* have, though I agree with you that suspicions are of little use to you. Still, the woman's conduct has laid her open to most serious suspicions; and, I confess, I am not one to allow the grass to grow any longer under my feet. I must be up and stirring, and if the investigation I mean to institute should bring any of your mysterious affair to light—you shall see me again, Sir Guy."

And with the same vehemence that had marked his entrance, Mr. Charles Topham made his exit, leaving Sir Guy Bohun thoughtful, perplexed, and uncomfortable.

The visit had been brief, yet it had completely upset the tranquillity into which Sir Guy thought he had subdued himself for ever.

"I wish the man had left me alone," was the thought uppermost in his mind; "I was very well as I was. Now, he has opened all the old wounds, roused all the old bitterness, set me going again—but no, it shall not be. *My* case is clear, whatever his may be. He may prove *his* wills forgeries, but mine is a case of a lost codicil—both will and codicil being undeniably valid, unless, indeed, I were to say, as poor Felix said himself, that he was intimidated into making it—and if I did, what then? Would any one believe me?—no! Could I prove it?—no—nor any one else! Mrs. Ponsford has taken precious good care of that. Confound that meddling fellow, Topham! I wish he had never known of my existence in town, for now I shall have no peace, unless I go—and if I go—where have I to go?"

Bitter thought! the man who had lived for an object all his life, now deprived of that object—his home. No wonder that he asked himself the question, where have I to go? To him there was but one place in the world, only one spot which contained the smallest interest for him, and that was Bohun Court.

But luckily there at last occurred to him a resource—the resource of the weary in body and the weary in mind; the resource equally of the idle or busy, the gay or the melancholy; the haven of the wealthy, the refuge of the poor; there was one other spot than Bohun Court where he could flee like the dove of old, and be at rest. He could go abroad.

And the next time Mr. Charles Topham called at the door of his fellow-victim's house in that sad, dull, narrow street, the answer he received was, that Sir Guy Bohun had gone abroad.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

TURN we once more to Bohun Court.

The lady sits in her easy chair before her costly toilet-table, and her long black hair is passing and re-passing between the slender fingers of the abigail who waits on her. That mirror reflects back two faces; one, pale to transparency, and passionless; the other wearing the stamp of care and vexation, with a shadow on the brow seemingly too deep for one so young.

"Which dress, my lady?"

"I do not care."

A gray one was produced.

"No, no; not that odious thing."

"White, my lady?"

"No, not white. Be quick, and don't worry me."

"Your ladyship is not going to wear a coloured dress?"

"Why should I not, Ponsford? Surely it is high time!"

High time! yes, for all that the poor old man was mourned, it *was* high time for colours; the young widow had laid aside her weeds the very day on which the twelve-month of (supposed) mourning had expired; she had laid aside her crape as soon as she possibly could; she had glided into gray, veiled with black lace, the moment fashion sanctioned the change; she had assumed white to please the eye of him who aspired to fill the place of the dear departed, and she had now taken a step which justified her resuming the colours she had so long resigned.

So long! yes, a whole year and a half! but Sir Felix had been forgotten nearly as long; the mask might be cast off now. Another reigned in his stead.

"High time, I am sure," repeated the scornful beauty, eying with some satisfaction a mauve velvet dress just arrived from town: "yes. I will wear that to-night, for a particular reason."

She paused. She wished to be helped out of the sentence, and Ponsford was in the humour to assist her, for it would answer her purpose.

"It is quite cold enough for it, my lady, though it is February."

"Not for that reason, Ponsford, as you may easily guess."

"No, my lady; but for one of the reasons."

"Then guess the other."

"You have fixed the day, my lady." (Almost inaudibly.)

"Why, Ponsford, you are a conjuror!—how could you possibly know?"

"I merely guessed, my lady—I think your ladyship once said that when the year and a half had expired——"

Lady Bohun leant back in her chair, and covered her face in her hands.

"Oh, Ponsford!" she exclaimed, with a touch of natural feeling, "I hope, I *hope* I have not done a foolish thing, but I have been worried into it. They have given me no peace. If I had but had a friend in the world to help me—but I have been obliged to answer entirely on my own judgment; and oh! if I should have made a mistake! Ponsford, do you think I shall repent?"

"Madam, I hope not."

"Ah, you think I shall! but perhaps not—perhaps—but it is done now, and I cannot retract. It is to be in three weeks, Ponsford! Good heavens! how little time that seems. Oh, Ponsford, if I should repent before the time comes!"

"Better than repenting afterwards, my lady."

"But, Ponsford, after all, it will not be such a very great change in my position. I mean to retain entire right over the whole of my property, and draw all my own cheques."

Ponsford smiled.

"You doubt it?"

"No, my lady; but I doubt a husband's approving such an arrangement!"

"But I mean to be firm. I am not going to give up my property as well as my liberty."

"Ah! if your ladyship likes liberty, no independence like the independence of a widow," remarked the confidential servant, shrewdly.

Euphemia was silent. She felt the truth of that remark, but it came too late. She was afraid of acknowledging, even to herself, that she had thrown from her what she loved best in the world next to her money, and that was indeed her independence; what good was it to look back?—none! for she had fixed the day.

A large party from the neighbourhood dined at Bohun Court that evening to meet Captain Aylmer; and Mrs. Blackstone was commissioned by her daughter to announce to their various friends, in official whispers, that this was his last visit previous to his marriage with Lady Bohun.

This was no difficult task. Everybody knew what they were going to be told, and all had but one opinion, that that rich and beautiful young widow was throwing herself away upon a spendthrift and a *roué*, for Captain Aylmer's character was no secret to any one except his own immediate and numerous family. *They* only said Sydney had been wild and a little extravagant, but so were all young men! *They* thought it was a very natural match. Phemy was rich now, and might marry whom she pleased, and she always liked Sydney, only her parents looked higher.

And poor Phemy, she was wretched that evening. In vain she saw her intended, radiant; it only depressed her

still more. In vain all her splendour glittered round her; she felt as if claws were grasping and clutching it out of her possession. It was a foretaste of what was coming. It was her independence slipping away from her with her widowhood; three more weeks, and for the second time she would be bound by a vow to love, honour, and obey. The first—yes, she liked Sydney Aylmer. The second—no, impossible! The third!—Euphemia Lady Bohun felt she was not born to obey!

"But as long as I am mistress of my money," thought she, "Sydney will obey *me*."

Poor soul! how long would that be? For just the few moments that would suffice to tie the irrevocable knot; after which, Euphemia Lady Bohun, you are a wife again, and moreover Captain Sydney Aylmer's wife, and you must arm for the contest *without* your independence to support you!

But first, mistress and maid must have a conference. Both know they have to come to some conclusion, and Lady Bohun charges first.

"Ponsford," she began, about a week before the wedding was to take place, "you and I must think over our plans for the future, now that matters are drawing to a close. I do not yet know whether it is you or Estelle who mean to accompany me to the Isle of Wight." (Lady Bohun knew the disposition of her second husband rather too well to arrange a tour including Paris this time.)

Ponsford was standing by a large table as Lady Bohun addressed her, and on the table, which was a circular one, lay all her ladyship's multiplicity of jewel-cases, so that, as they conversed, she could move slowly round, either facing her mistress or not, as the occasion required. It was with head averted, that she replied,

"I think your ladyship would find Estelle do very well, and it would be a pleasant change for her."

"Very well, Ponsford. I am quite satisfied with her powers. But about you? Sometimes I have fancied you had plans which might interfere with mine?"

"Oh, my lady! I should always endeavour that such should not be the case."

"I don't mean in that way, Ponsford. I mean that when we were in town I had an idea that—that you had

intentions somewhat similar to those which I am now about to put into execution myself?"

"You are right, my lady; but that is an affair of old standing, and quite optional with myself. I may choose my own time and entirely consult my own convenience."

"Lucky woman!" exclaimed Euphemia, with unguarded bitterness; "there are people in the world who would be glad to be you! But, however—I am sure I wish you well—is it that cousin in the Albany?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Then you will leave me, Ponsford?"

As Lady Bohun asked the question, her heart seemed positively to cease beating. Ponsford engaged to be married? Ponsford going to leave her? Ponsford about to resign her post without compulsion, in a friendly spirit?—the incubus of years to rise from her burdened victim, and leave the victim free?

Now, now for the first time, did Euphemia feel all she had gone through, and realise the unutterable joy and relief which such a departure would bring—yet it seemed too good to be true; tremulous with suspense, yet not daring to show the delight that was quickening every pulse, she waited for Ponsford's answer; and as the noiseless step moved round the table, and the delicate hands fingered the costly clusters of diamonds, rubies, and emeralds, whilst the pale countenance completely averted itself, the dropping of a pin might have been heard above the voice which replied,

"That rests entirely with your ladyship."

"With me?" exclaimed Lady Bohun, surprised; "how can that possibly be? Do you mean that as a married woman you would still retain this situation?"

"My lady, my marriage is, as I said, fixed for no particular day, month, or even year; I am simply engaged. Mr. Ponsford and I are both accustomed to much comfort and even luxury; we are neither of us so young as to think we could put up with love and indifferent lodgings."

"But, Ponsford"—Euphemia's heart palpitated painfully—"I thought your cousin was very well off; and as

for you"—she tried to smile convulsively—"I always look upon you as quite an heiress. Few people can boast as you can, of living to possess the income of no less than three legacies."

"It is true, my lady; but my life has been one of servitude. My youth has been devoted to those I have served, and my old age must be one, not only of rest, but of perfect comfort and competence, otherwise it would not answer my purpose to retire."

Lady Bohun's breath came short and quick. She saw, what indeed she ought perfectly to have known by that time, that there would be no getting rid of Mrs. Ponsford, unless Mrs. Ponsford chose to be got rid of. But the bright prospect of release having once opened before Euphemia's weary eyes, she could not resign it without another effort. She felt that whilst her income was yet within her own power, there was no sacrifice she would not make, only to feel herself free!

Never before had that old story of her father's come back so vividly, so truthfully, so fearfully, to her recollection. Often had she laughed at it, laughed it down, and treated it as the old man's favourite delusion; yet now it stood before her in its bare truth, pointing at her like an accusing spirit, "No tyranny like the tyranny of a servant!"

"Then you do not feel at present as if you were sufficiently affluent to try the great lottery?" said she, tremblingly.

"I feel, my lady, more as if there were still plenty of time," was the cautious answer.

And now Euphemia's difficulty was, how to smooth the way so artfully that her tormentor should take it without a suspicion that her services were being gladly dispensed with.

"It is a tantalizing state, Ponsford," she began.

"Oh, *dear* no, my lady!" exclaimed Ponsford, with her most sarcastic, but gentle laugh; "I am in no hurry, and Mr. Ponsford is doing very well."

"So are you," thought Euphemia; but she continued aloud, "I am sure, Ponsford, if anything I could do would assist you to complete what you require, you have only to say so. I intended to make you a present on my marriage,

and intended to choose it myself, but under present circumstances, perhaps you would rather select what would be most agreeable and useful to you, yourself?"

Ponsford inclined her head on one side over a case of rubies which Euphemia had spent a fortune upon.

"Good heavens!" thought she, "surely the woman is not going to choose those?"

"You are very good, my lady; very kind and liberal as you always are," replied Ponsford, at last; "but, perhaps, at such a moment as this, it might not be convenient to your ladyship to give what I should like best, so that really, perhaps, we may as well let the matter rest for the present. I am very well as I am; very happy and comfortable at Bohun Court, and most reluctant to inconvenience your ladyship in the slightest point, even in such a trifle as my leaving you, for it is a trifle to you, my lady, since Estelle——"

"Ponsford," said Lady Bohun, dreadfully agitated, yet alarmed lest her companion should see and take advantage of it! "let us put ourselves and our selfish interests out of the question for the present. Let us think of the future. Would it suit you best, in a worldly point of view, to remain with me, or to go?"

"Oh! madam, *that depends*."

"Upon what?"

Ponsford was silent. She was balancing a diamond earring of great value on one finger.

"Can it be jewels she wants?" thought Lady Bohun; and she remembered Lady Mary Topham's pearls. "Upon what, then, does it depend, Ponsford?" she repeated.

"Madam, you were so good as to say you were thinking of making me a present?"

"Yes, so I was."

"Might I ask—was it to be in a pecuniary form, my lady?"

"Why, it certainly was, because you know, as well as I do, Ponsford, that money buys everything. But if your prospects are what I suspect, perhaps furniture is what you would like best?"

"Oh! no, thank you, my lady."

"Can it be a house?" thought Euphemia, and there flitted through her mind a vision of Ponsford installed on

the estate, absent in person, but ever present in spirit and influence—(the upas tree growing in her very garden)—no! that could not be; if she were to leave at all, she should leave altogether. Once quit of her, then free!

Oh! hope delusive! vision most absurdly vain!

"Well, then, it is money," said her ladyship, briskly; "and I think your choice is very wise, since, as I said, money buys everything and everybody. The rich have always friends, so take my advice, Ponsford, and, when you marry, do as I do, and look sharply after your money. Come, here is my cheque-book—there—'Pay Mrs. Ponsford'—signed, 'Euphemia Bohun'—what shall it be? I am going to fill it up; will—will—" her voice faltered—"five hundred pounds buy your wedding suit, Ponsford?"

There was a dead silence, and Lady Bohun dared neither break it nor raise her eyes, for she did not comprehend it. Was the amount so immense that words failed the grateful recipient or was it not sufficient?

"Madam," said the thrilling voice; "the sum is handsome beyond my expectations; indeed, I could not accept anything so large *in one sum*. Your ladyship will forgive me, but I cannot allow a cheque to be made out in my name for more than *two hundred pounds*."

Lady Bohun breathed again. "Very well, Ponsford. You shall please yourself. If you like it better by instalments, so be it. Here, then is your cheque for two hundred pounds, and two hundred more shall be forthcoming on demand. I shall even then owe you another hundred, but you have been a good servant and friend to me in many ways, so when the day comes that you ask me for the fifth hundred, I will make it a clear *six*, so that you will have three cheques of two hundred each. Does that please you? I can get it all made out by Deedes and Grim in case of any accident to me."

"Madam, I cannot thank you sufficiently," said Ponsford; "but may I ask, are these all to be cashed on your marriage or on *mine*?"

"Upon my word, a very sharp question!" laughed Euphemia, so elated with her emancipation that she would not see a certain coldness of tone in the words of thanks which would have struck any one else; "on mine, of course; but if you like I can get the three cheques cashed now, at once,

so as to be safe, and place the money immediately for you, wherever you please."

"I do not think that would suit me," said Ponsford, calmly; "the arrangement I should wish made will require the assistance of Messrs. Deedes and Grim, inasmuch as I wish this sum of two hundred pounds to be put in the shape of an annuity."

Lady Bohun started.

"An annuity!" she echoed; "how do you mean?—an annuity—what?—oh, I understand, an annuity for three years."

"No, my lady; an annuity is *for life*."

Lady Bohun turned in her chair, and looked Ponsford full in the face.

"I am to pay you two hundred a year *for life*!" she repeated, slowly and distinctly.

Ponsford met the gaze without flinching.

"Yes, my lady; *for my life*."

Euphemia threw back her head with the haughty, dauntless air she so seldom ventured to assume before Ponsford, and exclaimed—

"Ponsford, you have taken leave of your senses. You must be joking."

"Indeed, madam, I am not."

"I am to pay you two hundred a year *for your life*, when you have already received two thousand pounds out of the estate? Good heavens! Do you know what you are saying?"

"Perfectly, my lady. That is the sum that I require on leaving you—*if* I leave you."

"If? Do you presume——"

"Madam, such words are unnecessary; I have named my terms. I think your ladyship will find on consideration that you had better comply with them; but if this should not suit you—why then I remain at Bohun Court."

"Ponsford," said Euphemia, after a moment's hesitation, words and voice alike failing her from concentrated indignation and anger; "it appears to me that you and I had better understand one another."

"I think we do, madam, perfectly," was the reply. Ponsford was so calm, it was so impossible to irritate her, that no words can describe the state of exasperation

into which her manner roused those who did not possess the same equanimity.

"Explain yourself, then," said Lady Bohun, afraid of trusting herself to say more, and Ponsford began.

"You understand, my lady, I am sure, that I have served you *and your interests* to the best of my ability——"

"For which you have been munificently paid!" interrupted Euphemia.

"Your ladyship must also understand that services such as I have rendered are *rewarded*—not only *paid*. If your ladyship alludes to the legacy of two thousand pounds, I do not call that munificent; the interest of that sum will yield me at the uttermost, one hundred a-year. I do not call that sum by any means commensurate with the income I have been the means of securing to yourself."

"You the means! Upon my word——"

"Yes, madam, I. It was I who first told you that Bohun Court would be left away from you; it was I who instigated you to dictate the will now in force; it was I, who, by dint of the most unwearied watchfulness, and in defiance of opposition on all sides, saw that that will was made——"

"By which, Ponsford, you have been a gainer to an amount which, if you recollect, called from all those present at the reading of it, expressions of the greatest surprise, to use a mild term."

"I treat individual opinions on such occasions with perfect indifference," said the fair legatee; "but I am showing your ladyship how far we do, or ought to, understand one another. To continue. That will was executed under the influence of intimidation."

Euphemia clenched her hands, and Ponsford saw the action.

"Yes, my lady; we both intimidated Sir Felix. I can bear witness to that fact any day I please."

"So can I," hastily ejaculated the lady.

"True, madam; but, by so doing, you would have to resign Bohun Court to Sir Guy, as well as refund the large sums expended during the last eighteen months, not to mention having to make good the timber cut down, on which Sir Guy set a store which no money could pay."

Euphemia leant her head in her hands. She was on the

rack, but the torture must be endured. She felt she was in this woman's power, and only waited to see the full extent of it.

"I, on the contrary," pursued Ponsford, "lose but little, *comparatively*. I lose the legacy your ladyship calls munificent, but I lose no position or character in the eyes of the world—that loss unhappily would be your ladyship's—supposing, I mean, that by declining to agree to my terms, you compel me to resort to the extreme measure of swearing to the existence of the codicil, at present mislaid."

"Mislaid!" cried Euphemia, looking up, her cheeks burning, and eyes flashing, "*lost*, you mean! if indeed, it ever existed, which I doubt."

"To that, also, I can swear," continued her tormentor, "and should circumstances compel me, I should use my best endeavours to find it. Hitherto, *for your ladyship's sake*, I have been perfectly passive, yet I *might* have found it—I may still; as to its existence, I saw it with my own eyes, and read every word of it whilst your ladyship slept on the sofa in the room adjoining that of Sir Felix, and Mr. Bohun slept soundly by his brother's side."

"Woman!" cried Euphemia, in a burst of uncontrollable passion, "what did you do with it? Why did you not say this before? Do you see into what depths of infamy you have drawn me?"

"To your first question, my lady, I answer, that I replaced it in its hiding-place. To your second, I was silent *for your sake*. I could not bring myself to expose, before so many eyes, the employer upon whose bread I was subsisting——"

"Fiend!" muttered Euphemia between her teeth, but Ponsford appeared not to hear the ejaculation. "To expose, indeed!" she cried aloud; "do you imagine that whilst exposing (as you call it) *my* doings, you yourself would have come off blameless?"

"Madam, the world would have judged between us. What do I lose if I am the means of setting aside this will?—*one* hundred a year! What do *you* lose?—everything, madam! Not only Bohun Court and its princely dowry, but something that the neighbourhood will not try to save for you—*your good name*."

Euphemia held her temples between her hands, and pressed them tightly. Every vein seemed bursting.

"And now, madam," said Ponsford, with perfect composure, regardless of the state into which her insolent reproaches and insinuations had thrown her mistress, "I think you will agree with me, that we understand each other. Your ladyship must see that by permitting me to retire from your service upon an annuity of two hundred a year, you remain undisputed owner of this property, and the means whereby it was obtained will be a secret for ever between us——"

Euphemia set her teeth—almost ground them together in her anguish.

"——if, on the contrary, you decline this arrangement, it is a duty I owe to myself to set seriously to work to find that lost codicil—hitherto, I have but put impediments in the way——"

"Ponsford!" cried Euphemia, "what would I give to expose you? I have a great mind to do it!"

"Sadly against your own interests if you did, my lady," retorted Ponsford, with a smile.

"What did you do with it?" repeated Lady Bohun, wildly, "what has become of it?"

"That is a question I cannot answer," said Ponsford, evasively; "suffice it to say, *it did exist*—circumstances may bring it to light again; should such ever happen——*Lady Bohun*," she continued, emphatically, "*it will be your ruin!* so think over my terms. If you agree to them, I quit your service; if you decline, I remain at Bohun Court. Really, I do not much care which it is."

But Euphemia had now borne as much as she could. She started to her feet

"Leave me," she exclaimed, pointing to the door, with a gesture of scornful command, yet with a dignity which apparently awed for a moment the contemptuous menial, "leave this room. When I have decided, I shall inform you. Until then, intrude yourself no more into my presence. Not a syllable more, if you please, but leave the room."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

ORDERED out of the room!—for the first time in her life, dismissed ignominiously and with the air of an empress, from the presence of a spirit even more dauntless than her own. Ponsford thought she had only to deal with a vixen. She found there was as much tigress as vixen in that spoiled and petted nature, and she felt her own temperate blood boil at the insult she had received.

"But she is in my power—yes, in my power, and knows it too! so, though she may try to humble, she can never crush me. She must fall herself in dragging *me* down!" and the indignant woman hurried along the passages to her own apartments, and locked herself into her room.

Could she have looked behind the panels of the room she had lately left, and seen Lady Bohun stretched on the bed in an agony of remorse, anguish, and humiliation, defying control, she would perhaps have been satisfied with what she had done. But as long as the scene was being enacted, Euphemia had borne up. The wily Ponsford had seen that she had had power to agitate her mistress, but of the extent of that agitation she had not an idea. Euphemia, in the woman's presence, had mastered herself, had held her ground proudly to the last moment; but no sooner was she relieved of that presence, than the overcharged heart broke down, and she flung herself on her bed in all the abandonment of an anguish which must be locked in her own bosom, and borne by herself alone. It was as Ponsford had justly remarked, with humiliating and degrading familiarity, "a secret between them for ever."

"Oh! father, father!" sobbed the lady of Bohun Court, "if I did but dare to tell you! if I could but crawl to your feet and tell you what I have done, and what that wretched woman has done, and if I had but courage to say, publish all, only rid me of her presence, I should be happy! but I dare not—it would kill the poor old man. He would never believe that I never knew of the positive execution and existence of that lost codicil till this day, and the dishonour would kill him. Besides, it is too late. She holds me

fast—she may betray me at any moment, whilst I—I have no alternative but to buy both her silence and her absence!”

That day Lady Bohun had to sit at the head of her brilliant table, and feel the guilty usurper that she was, and smile at the sallies of her buoyant intended whilst her heart was bursting, breaking, within her.

Mrs. Blackstone was growing old and obtuse, but Mr. Blackstone's eyes were keen, and he saw the trouble on his daughter's brow, and the tears swimming in her eyes, and his affection took alarm.

“Phemy, my darling,” said the old man, as he made her sit down in a low chair by his side after dinner, “you don't seem in good spirits. Is anything going wrong? tell your old father, my dear, and perhaps I can get you out of it whatever it is.”

But she denied the charge, for what else could she do?—tried, too, to laugh, whilst she denied it.

“I feel dull, very naturally, papa, for you know I am taking a very serious step.”

“Yes, my dear, very serious; but not taken, I hope, without due deliberation. Still, it is a serious step for one placed on such an eminence of prosperity as yourself”—(Euphemia winced)—“and you may well feel a little subdued; for husbands are husbands, be the wives ever so independent.”

“Ah! papa, independence is a blessed thing.”

“Nonsense, my dear. It is too late for you to say that; besides, I have a very good opinion of Sydney, though, begging your pardon, my dear, I cannot call him the wisest man that ever lived. But now that we are having a cozy chat, for I see your mother is fast asleep, and Sydney has taken to his eternal pipe (which I would annihilate if I were you), I want to ask you a question. My dear, you have got a new maid, I see—a young one, with a sort of lace d'oyl y on the top of her head——”

“Oh! papa, how absurd. Yes, Estelle.”

“Then, let me ask, are you going to part with that great lady who has been with you since——since——”

“Since I became Lady Bohun? Yes, papa, she is to go.”

“I am glad to hear it—I am very glad to hear it,” ex-

claimed the old man, energetically, "and I tell you why, my dear; I think she assumes, and presumes; you have done very wisely; you gave *her* warning, of course?"

Euphemia hesitated.

"It has been a sort of mutual arrangement and understanding more than a warning," said she.

"But still clearly understood I hope, my dear?"

"Oh! yes, papa. I shall make her understand, only I thought of not speaking till just as I was going away."

"And leaving her in the house with us?"

"Would it be unpleasant for you, papa?"

"My dear, I dislike that woman exceedingly——"

("Oh! clear-sighted and rightly judging!" thought Euphemia, as she sighed bitterly; but her father, mistaking the reason of the sigh, hastily corrected himself.)

"Not that I have any right, dear child, to set up a personal prejudice against any servant for whom, from long habit, you may entertain a regard——"

Euphemia raised her hands and eyes involuntarily with a gesture which was lost upon Mr. Blackstone, so he continued innocently,

"But, at the same time, if it could be arranged otherwise——your mother and I were saying the other day that if you really wanted a good, useful housekeeper, there is our own Mrs. Landon, who thinks of coming back to service; her shop never answered; she would just suit you——"

"Papa, I should be rejoiced to have her," exclaimed Euphemia, starting up. Then, as if suddenly recollecting herself, "but, perhaps, I had better be sure of Ponsford's going first."

"My dear!" said her father, with some surprise, "surely that rests entirely with you?"

Euphemia's only answer was, laying her head on her father's lap.

"My child," said he, seriously, "I once had a favourite old story——my Phemy always laughed at that old story——but it was one most painfully true, and one which need not be confined to *my* family only; it might be told of any in the land; but you remember how it testified to much misery caused by the tyranny of a servant. God grant, my Phemy, you may never know this tyranny; but

that also rests with you entirely. With proper energy and self-respect you could never be under any such dominion. Let me exhort you to exert both in the present case. Have you given this person the choice either to go or to remain?"

"I—I don't think so, papa," stammered Euphemia.

"You don't think, my dear? Do you mean, that it actually rests with *her*?"

"Papa—I am to have a final interview on the subject."

Mr. Blackstone was puzzled, and not quite satisfied.

"Phemy," said he, "if you wish her to go, tell her so, plainly. If you wish her to stay, you may perhaps be obliged to give her the option. That is *my* view. I see no other course."

It was Lady Bohun's view, too, and most heartily did she wish she could take that course, but, alas! her vision was not straightforward and simple like that of her father. Before *her* sad eyes were two courses. She was in that woman's power. The choice lay with *her*, yet this was part of the bitter secret; such a state of thralldom could not be told, particularly to that old man, whose dread of such a thing was so great that, had he suspected it, he would instantly have exerted his parental authority, and wrested his daughter from her humiliating position.

Euphemia knew this well, and knew also all the ruin such an explosion would entail: ruin, not only of her prospects, but, as Ponsford had truly said, of her good name. Besides, the just scorn of an indignant world would kill that old man, who had all his life been reckoned the very soul of honour. The story would soon get about, and the part Euphemia had played would be much more conspicuously shown forth than the subordinate machinations of her confidential servant.

"Better die," said she to herself, with a recklessness bordering on despair, "better die than be betrayed! yet it is not I who am so guilty; it is that woman; but she will make it appear my deed; and I shall have no redress—no witnesses; I shall stand before the world a dishonoured creature! No; death would be preferable. I must live and endure it."

"Papa," said she, aloud, "I must just think it over to-night, and to-morrow, I will make up my mind. She is very useful, and so, of course, I feel a reluctance—but

still—I hope I am quite capable of keeping my own ground if she turns restive, so do not fear for me. Only give me time.”

And time she took, for the day before the wedding arrived, and yet that final interview had been postponed from hour to hour—indeed, she and Mrs. Ponsford had not met in private since the memorable evening. Lady Bohun had begged her mother to share her room with her, and the general orders relative to the affairs of the house were given in her mother's presence.

Ponsford saw it all, and smiled in her heart. She did not regard it as a token of profound displeasure, but rather as a symptom of moral cowardice; and, instead of offending, it flattered her.

However, Lady Bohun knew that the moment must come, though she might push it off to the last, and she also knew that that dreaded and terrific interview must take place alone; therefore, on that last evening, a few minutes before it was time to summon Estelle to dress her for dinner, she rang the bell which was considered Ponsford's bell, and, with the cheque for two hundred pounds before her, awaited her arrival.

That those moments seemed hours, any one can readily believe. When a feud takes place between two who have been fast friends, how much more of rancour and bitterness there is than between those who never felt a spark of love for each other! When old enemies quarrel, the chances are they will make it up again; but when friends fall out, the bitterness is undying. They know each other's secrets, and each other's weak points; so they possess an advantage which enemies never can attain—the delicious advantage of using these secrets and weak points, as weapons.

Better trust to the tender mercies of an enemy, than to those of a friend who has ever turned against you.

So, with unutterable bitterness, and a sort of haughty, sullen disgust, Lady Bohun waited for the dependant who had shared her confidence, and possessed herself of her very thoughts for so long.

“How will she dare meet my gaze?” thought Euphemia; and at that moment, the door opening she raised her eyes fearlessly to the level of Ponsford's face.

The woman's countenance was unmoved. Pale, still, not a line, not a shadow, not a tint to betoken agitation; it seemed to gleam down in its whiteness like ice upon the rich warmth of Lady Bohun's complexion, heightened as it now was by the trial she had to go through.

And, with her usual stately ease, she advanced to the respectful distance at which she generally stood to receive Lady Bohun's orders.

"I have sent for you," began Euphemia, very slowly, looking her full in the face, but not calling her by name, "to tell you that I have made my decision on the point we were discussing the other day. The fewer words that pass between us now, the better. I wish merely to tell you that I agree to give you the two hundred a year required by you, on condition that you leave my house, and this cheque will pay the first year in advance. Messrs. Deedes and Grim, being now beneath this roof, will draw up the necessary documents securing this sum to you for the term of your life, to-night; and all I have further to remark is, that the sooner you quit Bohun Court after what has occurred, the better it will be."

With a slight wave of her hand, in dismissal, Euphemia now turned away, expecting to hear the footsteps retreat, and the door close upon that now hated form—but no; Ponsford never stirred; a moment's pause, and her calm, precise voice broke the silence.

"I have to thank your ladyship," said she, "for the choice you have given me. I look upon it as a choice, because I know that your ladyship grants the annuity reluctantly, and feels—as I do myself—that in the eyes of Messrs. Deedes and Grim, the arrangement will have a very singular appearance. In the more suspicious eyes of Messrs. Bland and Frumpton, who will no doubt hear of it, it will look what it is, a *compromise*, and I believe your ladyship will agree that this is an injurious light for either of us to appear in, where money matters are concerned. I have thought it well over, and have been for some days prepared with my answer. I gratefully decline the two hundred a year for the present"—a marked emphasis—"and will, therefore, if you please, remain at Bohun Court."

Utter amazement, almost amounting to dismay, deprived

Lady Bohun of the power of speaking for the first few seconds; but, quicker than lightning, in that brief space of time ideas had rushed through her mind—floods of ideas, which it would take long to write, and long to read, yet all passing through the brain with that wondrous rapidity which is the faculty of thought. But these ideas *might* be embodied in words; they *were* words in her own full heart.

"Will she not go?" thought Lady Bohun; "can I not compel her? does she mean to stay holding the sword over my head? shall I betray her? shall I throw the game up, and say at once, produce the hidden codicil, do your worst, and set me free? What should I lose by it?—Bohun Court! Yes, it would be *his*, then; but my jointure would be ample—Should I lose nothing else?—Yes; she would say I had been an accessory in the concealment. So I have, *for one week*; so my good name, as she justly said, would be the second loss. Good heavens! *that* is lost already! And I should have to stoop to Sir Guy Bohun! to be a despised object in his eyes! No, no, no—that I could not bear! But what shall I gain if I let her stay on her own terms?—Bohun Court—Sydney reckons on Bohun Court—I shall gain it, and retain my position. Now Heaven help me, for I must answer her!"

During this mental soliloquy, so rapidly held, her eyes had seemed to measure Ponsford from head to foot. The woman did not return the gaze, but she did not seem abashed by it.

"Do I understand you rightly?" were Lady Bohun's first words. They were more to gain time than in the light of a question.

"I hope so, my lady," was the reply; "and I believe I have acted for the best, even for your ladyship. With the lawyers and all your ladyship's wedding guests in the house, on the very eve of your marriage, I do not see how any other arrangement could possibly be made. Should you decline my terms, in all probability the wedding will not take place to-morrow. I shall consider it my duty to——"

"To be silent, if you please," interrupted Lady Bohun, her eyes flashing. "Until I *do* decline your terms, I shall thank you to favour me with none of your remarks, but to

recollect, that whilst under my roof, *you are my servant*, and I shall exact from you the respect and obedience which a servant is required to give. I pay for it, Ponsford—I shall exact it! When I cease to pay for it, you are no longer bound to give it. When I decline your terms, you may take your own measures; so long as I accede to them, I hold you to your duties! *Now* I hope you understand *me*."

- And with the imperious fury which Ponsford had never till now seen directed against herself, Lady Bohun rose from her seat and pointed to the door

Surprised for the moment out of her usual self-command, Ponsford obeyed the haughty gesture as if mechanically, and Euphemia resumed her seat, breathless.

"I have cowed her!" were the first expressive words that burst from a heart beating to suffocation. "I have frightened her, but she will recover; she will soon see that it is *I* who should shrink, not she, wretched woman! and then she will return to the attack. My triumph is empty, evanescent, absurd! when my fate is in her hands. What did she say about the wedding not taking place to-morrow?—could she stop it? Yes, if she holds that codicil, she could. If I betray her, I can indict her for felony; but I betray myself, too, by betraying her—no—things must rest as they are. I cannot do it. She must go on, triumphing, but she shall think I do not see her triumph. She shall think I believe but in my own!"

Lady Bohun's dinner-table that day was laid for twenty-four. In half an hour from the time of this scene she was seated at the head of it, magnificently dressed, laughing and talking as gaily as the gayest there. Ponsford had been right when she said, "If you decline my terms, in all probability the wedding will not take place to-morrow." Such a scandal, with the house full of the wedding-guests, would have been impossible. *Any* terms might have been made under such circumstances! The vampire had chosen her moment well

In the giddy excitement of that gay evening, Ponsford might be forgotten; but in the silent, quiet hours of the night, when Euphemia looked back upon the events of the day, the full horror of her position came before her, and she shuddered as she thought to herself, "How long shall

I have to endure this life? how long shall I live under the same roof with one with whom I am on such miserable terms? how long will she compel me to meet her cold white face at every turn, and try to shun her hateful presence? And yet people call me on the pinnacle of happiness and prosperity! Yes, so I am—but with a skeleton in my cupboard!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

AND now we pass over a year. It may sound but a short time, but where every month, and week, and day of it has had its stirring events and startling scenes, it seems a long time to the chief actors in life's weary drama.

We need not follow the newly-wedded pair in their wanderings, but we must come back with them to Bohun Court. They are married people now of twelve months' standing; they return to that beautiful home mutually disenchanted, like many and many a "happy couple" before them.

They started under, apparently, the very brightest of auspices; everybody said what a well-matched couple, what a handsome pair, what a lucky man! Yes, it all seemed very dazzling and very happy; but each of them carried away in their own bosoms their skeletons, and they brought them back again to Bohun Court—two now, instead of one.

Lady Bohun sits in her own morning room, at a table covered with papers, in an attitude more expressive than graceful; her elbows are on the table, and her hands, pushing back her hair, are clasped over her forehead. With the slight, arched brows firmly knit, and the full, curved lips compressed into a look of desperate determination, she sits watching, with the eye of a lynx, the gray-haired man before her, on whose venerable face is seen only an expression of deep grief.

It is her father. He is plunging into a perfect abyss of accounts, and the long dormant genius of the man of

business shines out now in bright and bold relief, though the task is driving a dagger into his heart.

And at last it seemed even to puzzle *him*.

"My Phemy, it exceeds even my utmost expectations; you must look the evil boldly in the face, for you have much to endure."

"I am quite prepared, papa," said Lady Bohun, not in soft tones, but in a voice of stern displeasure. There was no softness about her now. She sat there, feeling that she was an injured, and, worse than that, a deceived woman. She sat there writhing under a woman's most bitter trial—that of knowing that she had married for love, and had been married herself for money! "I am quite prepared for *anything*."

"Then, my child, you knew, when you married, that Sydney had debts?"

"Yes, I own I did; but who could ever have dreamed that with a fortune like mine, I could not, with a stroke of my pen, have extricated him from them?"

"It would have been wiser, my child, to have given me a hint, that I might have looked into matters a little. Of course, I knew that Sydney had always been extravagant——"

"I wish I could put his extravagance into the past tense, papa," said Euphemia, bitterly; "what has he done for the last year but spend, spend, spend? And now, for the first time in my life, I feel that I actually dare not draw a cheque, so enormously is my account overdrawn. Good heavens! dearest father," she exclaimed, clasping her hands with sudden energy, "what an idiot I have been! I thought that by reserving to myself the power of drawing my own cheques, I should escape half the miseries and humiliations of other married women; and what have I gained by it? nothing! I have drawn the cheques, it is true, but not for myself! I have drained the exchequer"—a laugh of sarcastic anguish—"and derived no benefit from it! But I should not complain, could I but have cleared *him*, and that you say is impossible?"

"My dearest, had it been only Sydney's *debts*, we could have kept our heads above water well, for with such an income and estate as yours"—a smothered groan—"there are myriads of ways and means of raising money;

but, my child, it is not his debts at which I tremble, it is his liabilities."

"And what may they amount to?" asked the young wife, in blissful ignorance of such calamities, yet sufficiently sensible that they were something dangerous, and consequently putting the question in a sort of concentrated voice, as if to say, tell me the worst at once.

Mr. Blackstone looked up in some surprise at the question.

"My dear," was his answer, "liabilities mean indefinite sums—sums, of which the amount *may* be incalculable!"

Lady Bohun clasped her hands together.

"But to proceed to business," continued her father: "the first point to be considered is, how the debts can be liquidated. I do not wish to add to the pain you are suffering, Phemy, but it certainly does seem surprising to me, that, reserving as you did the right of drawing your own income, and paying Sydney a certain yearly sum, you could not manage to hold him a little more in check."

"I should like to know," cried his daughter, with a burst of indignant bitterness, "what sort of a life the wife would lead who ever dared to refuse her husband money! Oh! papa, you know the world too well to think (as I did, like a poor weak fool as I was!) that the mere fact of my being able to prevent his signing his name to draw money, would ensure the safety of that money. Good Heavens! I had better have been a labourer's wife, earning his daily bread and weekly shillings, than the wretch I am, dreading the return of every morning's sun!"

"My Phemy," said her father, gently, "there is nothing for you to dread——"

"A—h!" groaned Lady Bohun.

"——Even if it came to the worst, as long as your mother and I live, you are safe as far as home and protection goes. But now, to look things seriously in the face, I fear I must catalogue Sydney's offences——"

"Do, do! nothing will surprise me."

"He has put his name to bills—that I know. By this act alone, he stands upon a volcano. Next, he——"

"Why enumerate his deeds?" interrupted Lady Bohun, with vehemence, "will it help the matter at all?"

"No—I cannot say it will, unless by preparing you——"
"I am prepared already, for anything! everything! all I want to know is, can he avoid arrest?"

"Certainly, if——"

"If what? if he flies his country?"

"I hope it has not come to that yet."

"Oh! papa, hope nothing!" and again Lady Bohun laughed sarcastically. "I have hoped till I have wearied of hoping. It is the happy who hope—not I! oh! not I!"

And she hid her face in her hands, and her thoughts travelled back to those bright bygone days of real peace, happiness, and prosperity, when even her brilliant lot did not seem to satisfy her, and all her wealth and luxury did not suffice to expel from that lovely home of hers the skeleton which her imagination saw in it.

Oh! could those days but come again! Alas! and alas! What would she now have given to be once more Sir Felix Bohun's honoured, petted wife, or Mr. Blackstone's envied daughter!

"It is my day of retribution," said she, to herself, "and God only knows how much more I may have to suffer. My punishment is severe, but it is just. I deserve it all, and more. Let me, then, meet it boldly.—Papa," she continued aloud, "ought not Sydney to be present during this investigation?"

"Certainly, my dear, certainly, if you can prevail upon him."

"If? Why should he refuse?"

"Well, my dear, try."

The old man spoke very calmly, but Lady Bohun left the room in a fever of agitation.

"Not come and help us when we are taking all this trouble for *him*?" thought she, as she hurried to his room; "surely he has not the effrontery to refuse?"

And she almost burst open the door of the room he had appropriated to himself. Through an atmosphere as dense with smoke as any London fog, the refined and once-fastidious Lady Bohun discerned her husband.

(Time was—and her heart often reminded her of it—when Mr. Bohun was not allowed to pass through the conservatory with a cigarette in his hand, whilst now Captain

Sydney Aylmer wandered through all the costly rooms of Bohun Court smoking a cigar four inches long, and the thickness of a walking-stick, unproved !)

"Sydney," exclaimed his wife, impetuously, "my father wishes to know if you are coming to assist us in our most unpalatable task this morning? We have been wading through all the bills, and arranging them——"

"The deuce you have—thank you; preparatory to paying them, I hope," was the cool reply, a puff of smoke issuing from his lips between every sentence.

"I should have thought," was the retort, "that even you would hardly have the face to ask me to do more than I have done!"

"Even I? Am I so very bad? Well, it can't be helped. You took me for better, for worse, so you have no right to complain if you find it is for the latter. You ladies sometimes make bad bargains."

"I do not come here to listen to your ill-timed jokes," cried Lady Bohun, contemptuously; "but to require your presence in the library, where my father has been hard at work in your service ever since breakfast."

"I never asked him to trouble himself, Phemy."

"Then, who is to do it? Are we to plunge deeper and deeper into the abyss, and not make a single effort to save ourselves? *You* will not exert yourself, so my father is obliged to do it. He will not see my fortune squandered without, at least, attempting to save me from poverty."

"Squandered? now, I call that good. I think, considering that you can have very few expenses compared to mine, you have spent a pretty penny yourself this year. Considering that I allow you four hundred a year for your dress——"

"*You* allow me?" cried Lady Bohun; "*you?* when every farthing is mine?"

"My Lady Bohun, a married woman's money is her husband's. Don't you irritate me, nor interrupt me. I say, you need not talk of my extravagance, when you have spent such sums this year yourself, in a manner totally incomprehensible to me."

"Sydney," said Euphemia, turning very pale, "I told you when we married that I would have no inquiring into

the manner in which I spent my money, neither would I render any account to you for the sums I drew."

"Perhaps so, and if you had drawn a few hundreds more than your allowance——"

"My allowance? Good Heavens!"

"I might have overlooked it; but, my fair Phemy, whilst you have been busying yourself with *my* money matters, I have interested myself in yours, and, for the life of me, I cannot make out what you do with a two hundred pounds which you seem to take regularly every quarter over and above your pin-money."

Lady Bohun's face, which had been gradually growing paler and paler, now became quite ashen in its hue; she clenched her hands on the back of the chair over which she was leaning, and replied, in a low, desperate sort of voice,

"Sydney, when I get into debt—when I bet, and gamble, and put my name to bills, and scatter a noble fortune to the winds—speak as you have now spoken, not till then. You have no right to question the manner in which I spend my income. Even if you had, your conduct, your reckless extravagance, your guilty folly, and your heartless indifference, would be sufficient to rouse me to rebellion. As it is, I deny your right. And now, back to your own wretched affairs. Are you coming to the library?"

"No, I am not; there!"

"You will not assist my father? Do you know that he is working in the dark? How can he help you if you will not give him a clear and a *true* statement as to what you really do owe?"

"I don't know myself, so how can I enlighten him?"

"You must know to a certain extent. Besides, he wishes to save you the humiliation of making these horrid revelations before Messrs. Deedes and Grim, whom we expect by every train."

"Deedes is a brute, and Grim is a fool, and you may tell them so from me."

"They are so accustomed to hear you call all our country neighbours by those names, that I fear they will not feel their force. However, they come here as necessary evils,

and may be of great use, at all events, to *me*, if not to you, so I intend to be civil to them——”

At this moment, the sonorous bell of Bohun Court resounded through the hall.

“They are here,” said Lady Bohun, trembling with agitation, and deadly pale.

“Give me a light,” said Captain Sydney Aylmer; “I shall have one more cigar, and then, perhaps, I may come.”

Lady Bohun turned and left the room with a chill at her heart, the chill of wounded affection—for she had really cared for her cousin Sydney—and the chill of impending misfortune. She could not realise pecuniary difficulties, yet she felt a sort of foreshadowing of what they might be. She felt now, for the first time, that loss of money would bring destruction upon her. Without a golden key, how could she lock the cupboard that contained the skeleton that haunted her!

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THAT whole day, Messrs. Deedes and Grim were shut up in the library with Mr. Blackstone. Lady Bohun could not be persuaded to join them; she said she was ill, and her father did not urge it, since one glance at her countenance could tell him that the illness was not feigned. Euphemia, generally so tenacious upon matters of business, shrank from the present inquiry with perfect horror, for the effect of the shock upon her health had been so great that she really was ill.

“Only tell me,” said she to her father, “what there will be left for me to live upon, and I care to know no more. Sydney has injured me so deeply by his deceitful conduct, that if it is better we should part—be it so—only let me know what I have left, and let it be certain; he must not be able to touch my income again. Any sum that you

may rescue must be secured to my sole and separate use ; otherwise, in five years I shall be a beggar."

And so Messrs. Deedes and Grim, and Blackstone pored over all the letters, all the papers, and all the bills belonging to Captain Sydney Aylmer which could in any way throw light upon his circumstances. There was no difficulty in accounting for the position in which they now found him with regard to money matters, for half an hour's examination enabled them to ascertain that within three months after his marriage he had paid debts to the amount of eighteen thousand pounds.

"How could you let him have such a sum without a word of inquiry?" Mr. Blackstone had asked his daughter.

"I did not know it," said she.

"Not when you drew all the cheques yourself?"

"I signed my name to blank cheques, and he filled in the amount himself. I trusted to his honour not to take more than he really wanted,—never to overdraw our account—this is my reward! I knew he had debts when we married. I little dreamt he was on the verge of ruin! Had I ever refused him money, my life would have been made intolerable to me."

And a burst of tears, tears of wounded pride and bitter disappointment, streamed from those eyes, to which such tears were sadly strange.

But the great difficulty with which Messrs. Deedes and Grim had to contend was, the impossibility of coming to a right conclusion as to the gallant captain's liabilities.

"We know pretty well what he has spent, and what his outstanding debts are," said they to Mr. Blackstone; "but we much fear there is worse behind the curtain. We really think the best plan would be for Captain Aylmer to go out of the way just for the present, for fear of accidents, and then our duty must be to raise money upon the estate."

This suggestion was accordingly imparted at once both to Lady Bohun and her husband. As for Captain Aylmer, he was passive. As long as he had his cigars, his valet, his dressing-case, and his new gloves every day, it was utterly indifferent to him where he was. But when it came to the question of raising money on the estate, Lady Bohun stood firm. With a blanched cheek and quivering

lips she vehemently and absolutely refused to allow any such plan to be put into execution. In vain even her father urged that he saw no objection to it. *She* saw an objection. *She* knew well enough what only one other in the world knew—that money *must not* be raised on Bohun Court. Suppose that dreadful secret ever to ooze out (and it was in the keeping of a woman *not to be trusted*), who was to refund that raised money?

"No, papa, take any measures you please but that, for Bohun Court *must not* be touched."

"Only money raised on it, Phemy?"

"To be repaid—how?"

"By saving, by great care and economy."

Lady Bohun laughed bitterly.

"Care and economy where Sydney is concerned?"

"Then, my dear, there is but one other alternative. Sydney must fly."

"Let him!" exclaimed the indignant wife; "what better could he do? but not a finger shall be laid on Bohun Court. Look!" she added, walking to the window and pointing to the thinned plantations; "look at all that timber cut down to pay his way through this frightful year! How are those glorious trees ever to be replaced?"

"My dearest," said Mr. Blackstone, mildly, "fortunately, there is no positive necessity for your replacing them at all. You have robbed only yourself."

The remark, uttered in such pure ignorance, went like a dagger to that heart so full of conscious guilt, and, with feelings of humiliation and degradation which seemed to bow her young head to the very dust, Lady Bohun turned and left the room, giving her poor old father only the idea that she could bear no more.

She shut herself up in her own boudoir, and spent that evening alone with her mother, Mr. Blackstone coming in and out occasionally to report the progress of the lawyers, and to share the light repast which was all those heavy spirits cared to taste.

Messrs. Deedes and Grim also dined alone, but they sat in state in the great dining-room. To them, the first salmon, the early cucumbers, the diminutive lamb, forced peas, and precocious potatoes, had charms which gladdened

their hearts, laden, not with griefs, but with most lucrative business and profitable cares.

As for Captain Sydney Aylmer, he took good care to have all his usual creature comforts dispensed to him, but even *he* had not the face to discuss them in company, so he prudently kept to his own den, with the pleasant reflection that all these mysterious proceedings were being enacted on his account, and that it was his own reckless extravagance that had disturbed the machinery of that once-regular establishment.

But Messrs. Deedes and Grim spent a very pleasant time of it. The champagne and the claret of Bohun Court were proverbial, and their spirits rejoiced as they filled and refilled their glasses. Mr. Grim grew jovial over it.

"I have often heard," said he, when the servants had left the room, "of ducks and drakes being made of a fine property, but I never saw a clearer instance of it than the present."

Mr. Deedes agreed. It was very lamentable, he said; but what he considered more lamentable still, was the change in Lady Bohun. Bad as the case was, he could not see sufficient cause for such intense misery as it appeared to inflict upon her.

"She looks as if she had had her death-blow. What a wreck! Bless my soul, what a wreck in one short year! How well I remember her on the occasion of the death of Sir Felix, just two years ago now; what a fine, handsome, spirited young woman she was, and how grandly she stood up in defiance before Sir Guy Bohun, when there was that doubt about the will, and that codicil, you know——"

"Queer business that; queer story," said Mr. Deedes, *sotto voce*. "We came out better than I expected in that."

"She is not the same creature now," was Mr. Grim's rejoinder, and this was true enough. Could any one have entered her dressing-room that night, and seen her sitting, her long hair dishevelled, her cheeks pale and sunk, and her eyes fixed on vacancy, they would have asked, what dark shadow has passed over that young spirit? what weight is hanging over that troubled brow? Lady Bohun is not indeed the same creature now, not even in courage; for troubles and trials break down nerves which once seemed

made of iron, and at every slightest noise that echoed through the large, silent house, she started visibly.

She sat there alone, waiting for her mother. The lawyers had returned to their labours again after dinner, and Mrs. Blackstone had promised to look in and tell her their final resolutions as she went up to bed; for they were to depart by an early train the following morning, if they could get through their business that night.

Singularly enough, the flood of misery now pouring in upon her heart, seemed quite to have swallowed up, for the time being, the one great misery of her life. She had groaned beneath a secret tyranny for many years—she was now the victim of an open one. She had lived for many months with a constant dread gnawing and gnawing at her peace—the dread of detection—and now she sat in terror at the prospect of poverty opening before her—poverty and pecuniary disgrace; she would be pointed at now as the wife of the man who had been obliged to fly his country for debt!

She fancied that what she was now suffering was harder to bear than anything she had yet suffered. It was, in fact, one misery swallowing up another, and the last seemed, of course, the greatest, because one was dormant (though it required money to keep it so), and the other was active—this, too, requiring money, but *that* the lawyers must settle.

“If they cannot,” was her bitter *refrain*, “let him fly. He could not do better.”

She bent herself double, and with her face hidden in her hands, Lady Bohun rocked herself backwards and forwards in the abandonment of her anguish and indignation.

She wondered what her servants would think of all that was going on? of the arrival of the lawyers? of their dining alone in state in the dining-room, whilst she, and her father and mother were ensconced in their private apartments, and Captain Sydney Aylmer in his? She was obliged to descend to all these small mundane reflections, for the romance of her life was over. What would her servants think of all this? *They* would be the first people to suspect that something was wrong—not the neighbourhood—it would be some time before the neighbourhood took

alarm, and when they did, it would be on a grander scale, as it were; it is less humiliating to be degraded in the eyes of the world at large than in the sight of one's immediate dependants—people who are busying themselves around you, and watching you, from morning till night. It is difficult to play the heroine to *these*.

Suddenly, as she sat brooding, and reflecting, and listening, there fell upon her ear a step approaching along the passage leading from the main corridor to Lady Bohun's room—a step that made her heart beat to suffocation. It was not her mother's; it was a step she had not heard there for many months—it was one which had not dared, for all those months, by tacit agreement, to venture near her door—for a barrier had, by degrees, sprung up between the owner of that footstep and Lady Bohun.

Ponsford was no longer housekeeper. Lady Bohun had now a professed cook, to suit the taste of Captain Aylmer, and she was much too fine a lady to submit to a housekeeper, so Ponsford merely resided at Bohun Court, in what capacity nobody knew. Everybody saw that there was something mysterious in her residence there, but reckoning her as a servant like themselves, the other servants (with the *esprit de corps* which always animates that worthy class) forbore to make any remarks on the subject, and only concluded that she had her own reasons, eligible and good, no doubt, for staying—otherwise she would go.

There was only one circumstance that at all attracted remark, and that was, that any communication that took place between Lady Bohun and Mrs. Ponsford was always held in writing. Notes often passed between them; words, *never*.

And now that well-known step approached the door. That it should venture to do so, made Lady Bohun's hasty and passionate blood boil again. But there it came, advancing in its light, measured tread, and then came the short, sharp knock.

To the vampire, Lady Bohun still held herself a heroine. With the same air of imperious command, which sat so well on her in former days, she now turned herself round to meet that woman face to face once more, and to ask her, by that mute gesture, the purport of her intrusion. Any one else would have been daunted. Not so Mrs. Ponsford.

Lady Bohun knew that had not Ponsford some serious reason for seeking a personal interview, she would not have braved one.

"She knows I am in her power—she knows that she may exasperate and insult me with impunity; but she knows, too, that however far she may presume, *I am her match*, so now—let her speak first—it must be something vital."

These thoughts seemed to shine through Lady Bohun's eyes. They flashed with a sort of fierce, inquiring glance, and the marble image-like countenance before her met the burning gaze with one as fixed, as calm, as cold as ice.

"I come, madam"—the voice sounded like what one might suppose a spirit's might sound, so clear and low—"I come to inform you that it is my intention to leave Bohun Court."

Lady Bohun bent her head with the slightest possible inclination.

"If your ladyship recollects," she continued, "you gave me leave to do so last year; but it so happened that at that moment it did not suit my plans. Now, however, it does, and I have waited on your ladyship to take my leave in the first place, and in the next to say, that as Messrs. Deedes and Grim are in the house, it may possibly be as well that they should put, in formal words, the terms on which I *do* leave you. There is nothing like black and white in such matters," she added, meaningly.

Lady Bohun held her breath for a moment, with tightened lips. Was this to be borne? was such cool insolence to be tolerated? and these terms to be acceded to without one effort to oppose such tyranny?—No!

"Ponsford," said she, glaring at her, "a year ago, you say, I gave you leave to go—it was no such thing; *I desired you to quit* Bohun Court, and my words were, *the sooner the better*. I desired you to go, on your own terms, and you refused—consequently, the treaty, the compact, or whatever name it may bear, falls null and void to the ground. I do not now forbid you to leave the house; on the contrary, I say again, *go*; but *this* time you go on *my* terms—empty handed."

Ponsford looked firmly in her mistress's face.

"Your ladyship is in earnest? You positively decline to allow me the two hundred a year you promised me?"

"I promised it under very different circumstances; you refused it, and the promise was absolved; it is now no longer in my power to renew it."

"I thought as much," said the vampire, with a smile; "I was quite prepared for it; but, unfortunately, I must live, like all the rest of the world."

"Live?" cried Lady Bohun, "have you not made enough by me to live for *years and years*? Have you not been absolutely living on me ever since you and I first met, and how much money have you had from me *this year alone*?"

"I have not counted," was the calm reply.

"But I have," exclaimed Lady Bohun, "and the sum amounts to *eight hundred pounds*! Have you the face, after receiving so unprecedented a sum, to ask me for more? *Me*, a married woman? whose husband must, of course, be partially cognisant of her expenditure? Have you the effrontery to suppose that I am to continue to supply you, at this most unjustifiable rate, with money for which I must in some way account?"

"Madam, I do not call it unjustifiable; when a lady has a secret which she requires kept (and kept, too, at great personal risk), she must pay for the safety of it. It is on these grounds that I now demand my two hundred a year; provided," she added, carelessly, "that your ladyship still requires the secret kept—*not unless*."

Lady Bohun was in a reckless mood that night. It was on her lips to exclaim, "*I do not!* now do your worst!" but at the very instant that she would have uttered the words, the door opened, and Mr. and Mrs. Blackstone entered together. A glance showed them that they were interrupting an interview of a very agitating character; for Euphemia's cheeks were crimson, and her whole appearance reminded her mother of those very early days when, in the infant Phemy's violent rages, the utmost exertion of gentle determination was called into action to quell the fiery temper of the impulsive child.

But that a domestic should have had power to rouse her to this pitch, seemed to her parents unbecoming and wrong. They flew to her in affectionate haste, her father

firmly convinced that she was now a lamentable case in point of the tyranny to which he had long seen she was insensibly yielding.

"My Phemy," they exclaimed, in one breath, "what has happened? how can we help you? Only give the due authority, and we shall see that you meet with no insolence from your menials."

The prominent idea, in both those honest, open minds, was, that finding matters were "*going wrong*" in the house, this pampered domestic, thinking only of herself, was about to make an honourable retreat from the sinking vessel whilst something could be saved from the wreck, but had given notice of her intentions in some obnoxious manner.

"Tell us what it is, my Phemy," they continued, Mr. Blackstone having prudently locked the door; "tell us only."

But this was exactly what Lady Bohun could *not* do, as she well knew; and her terror lest Ponsford should be listening in the passage, held her lips still more firmly closed. All she could utter was,

"She is going, dear father; she is going!"

"And all the better, my dearest. She ought to have gone long ago."

"And I have much to settle—much to arrange with her," continued Lady Bohun, trembling from head to foot; "let her return for a few minutes. Go to bed, dearest father and mother, and reserve business till the morning—it is too late to-night—only let me just say one word to Ponsford."

"Not alone," said Mr. Blackstone decisively; "you shall not be exposed to that woman's insolence again, unless in the presence of either your mother or myself. I saw enough of her, as I entered, to judge of the mood she is in; and I recollect too well what I suffered in my youth—."

"Papa dear, I am afraid I must see her, if only to say one word," persisted Lady Bohun, too wretched now even to smile at her father's well-known reminiscences.

"Cannot the word be spoken before witnesses?" asked her father, with equal pertinacity.

Lady Bohun hesitated—how was she to answer? What

could she say without criminating herself? And yet two words would suffice—either “I agree,” or “I refuse.” Why could she not say them? and them only? Gasping for breath, half-choked with emotion, she made one vehement effort at self-control, and took the fatal plunge.

“Call her in,” was all she could articulate; and whilst she and her mother sat in breathless silence, as if awaiting some dreadful doom, the old man walked, with a determined step and a firm face, out of the room.”

Mrs. Blackstone had neither her husband’s firmness nor her daughter’s spirit. Her strength of mind had been sorely upset by the trials and troubles of the last few days, and she now found herself unable to do more than pillow that aching head upon her breast, and echo every sigh that burst from Lady Bohun’s lips.

But now came the sound of Mr. Blackstone’s returning steps; and Euphemia, believing she would now be called upon to renew the fearful encounter which had been interrupted, rose up, ready for the emergency—rose up like a lioness—she felt there was a something urging her on to her destiny—nothing could avert it, so on she must go; it mattered little whether the pace were fast or slow—the verge was reached—it was for Ponsford to give the push.

Mr. Blackstone entered. Oh! intense relief, he was alone!

“My dear, the woman has shut herself into her room, locked the door, and told your maid, Estelle, that she was going to bed. Would you wish her summoned?”

“Oh! no, no, no!” cried Euphemia, clasping her hands in transport at the reprieve; “no! I would have gone through it if necessary, but as it so happens, so let it be. Let me have a little breathing time; I can bear no more to-night; to-morrow I may be better able; to-morrow, in fact, I *must*!”

And grasping at the straw on which to rest, that drowning soul tried to close her eyes in forgetfulness.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

LADY BOHUN awoke the next morning with all the sensations with which one is always oppressed after a day of great grief, great joy, or great fatigue.

First, the feeling of bewilderment—she only knew at first that some tremendous blow had fallen upon her; what was it? Then she had a vague recollection of a scene with Ponsford—a scene which was to be repeated—so thus far she felt that her eyes had only opened to misery. Then came a recollection of the moments just before her eyes closed in sleep—she remembered all the unusually heavy steps backwards and forwards along the oak passages. Now she remembered that the lawyers were in the house—yes, and the reason they were there! Then the last sounds she heard—a scuffling and scrambling along the gallery. Ah! shame, grief, and bitter humiliation!—those were the footsteps of the men-servants carrying Captain Sydney Aylmer off to bed. Alas, and alas! that was no unusual sound; it was only a part of her awakening from the day-dream of her life, her love-match!

Yes, all these recollections came crowding on her with overwhelming force as she woke up from sleep, and then she looked round her with a sort of “Where am I?” glance.

She was not in her bed; not even divested of her *peignoir* in which she had spent the previous evening; she had fallen asleep in her arm-chair, and on looking towards her bed, she saw her mother occupying it, peacefully sleeping—to tell the truth, snoring.

“Happy creature! dear old mother! I shall never sleep again as you are sleeping now!” thought Lady Bohun, as she looked at the calm and comely features, and then she returned to her chair, to think over the probable trials of the new day before her.

First, of Ponsford. To accede to her demand was of course compulsory; she had no alternative; and yet, in the heat of the moment, the evening before, she must certainly have given the woman to understand that she was about to combat the point, if not absolutely to refuse her

demand. What would this refusal entail upon her? She was afraid to think; she must leave that to the power that says, "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

What she would have liked to know was, Ponsford's sentiments upon that last most stormy interview.

"To all appearance, I was her match; but in heart, oh! what a coward!"

And now the various sounds of early morning began to echo through the long passages of Bohun Court. Shutters were opened, great bars and bolts withdrawn, and Mrs. Blackstone woke to wonder how she could possibly have overslept Phemy, who was generally so lazy in the morning.

Then came Mr. Blackstone. He was going to breakfast with Messrs. Deedes and Grim. "It is but civil, my dear, for Sydney says he has a bad headache."

Messrs. Deedes and Grim were to go by the mid-day train, and suddenly there arose in Euphemia's mind the idea that she must not let them go until she had settled Mrs. Ponsford. Consequently, there must first be the dreadful and dreaded interview with *her*, and then a sort of specious and confidential conversation with the lawyers, —reducing the establishment, an old servant going away, retiring pension, &c., &c.

Now that she was fairly plunged into the depths of it, Lady Bohun's courage and spirit rose with the circumstances; and as soon as she and her mother had taken their silent, scanty, hasty, wretched meal—that sort of meal that one takes, half choked by every morsel, when a great grief is upon us—she called Estelle, and desired her to summon Mrs. Ponsford.

"Five minutes will suffice, dearest mother; when five minutes have elapsed, do you come in accidentally."

But vain the precautions, thrown away all the plotting and planning! Estelle came back with the face of a ghost.

"Miladi, Mrs. Ponsford is gone!"

"Gone?" Euphemia's eyes opened to their fullest extent, and her breath seemed to stop; "how do you mean, *gone*?"

"She has left Bohun Court—she has taken all her

things—she went away by the Parliamentary train,” were the sentences panted forth by Estelle, with the real alarm of innocence, and there was a dead silence. Words fell from Lady Bohun’s lips, but they were uttered more as a deep groan than in articulate sounds. Even her mother could not have guessed that they framed the sentence, “*Then I am lost!*”

There came over her face a livid hue of undefined terror. She was expecting she knew not what—this was the dawn of what appeared to her the darkest day of her life.

And there she sat, a numbness creeping over her, listening to every sound, and starting at every footfall, but uttering no syllable; and her mother had the tact and the charity to sit by her side in silence—the greatest kindness she could bestow upon her.

The reflections of those few morning hours aged Lady Bohun twenty years. The worn looks and the neglected hair—for to submit to the touch of even Estelle’s handy fingers would have been torture—all told their weary tale. People in affliction or distress seldom think of personal appearance, and it was Mrs. Blackstone herself who took courage, and at last approached the living statue, passing a soft handkerchief, dipped in rose-water, over the pallid features, and rolling the masses of dark hair up into their net of gold thread, “just to make her fit to be seen.”

“By whom?” thought the wretched young wife; “whom am I to see next?”

The departure of Ponsford had created an extraordinary sensation through the house, and when Mr. Blackstone heard of it, he looked upon it as something so mysterious and singular, that, without saying anything to his daughter, he began to make a few inquiries about her departure amongst the domestics. When did she go?—how did she go?—had she had any letters? and had she seen her ladyship before her departure?

“She went away at a quarter before six in the morning. Her old friend, William, the groom, had brought round the brougham for her, and a cart had taken a regular load of luggage (ergo, the departure was not unpremeditated); no letters had arrived so early, but the telegraph boy had been seen at the lodge. Mrs. Ponsford, it was supposed,

had taken leave of her ladyship the evening before; certainly, she had not been near Lady Bohun's rooms that morning."

To all, excepting Lady Bohun herself, that hasty flight was a mystery, but to Euphemia it was none. All she could think, all she could say to herself was, "I am lost. I exasperated her, and she will ruin me!"

And nothing remained for her now but to await, with the patience of utter recklessness, the issue of this long-endured tyranny, for it was evidently drawing to a climax.

There are certain hours in our existence, sometimes hours of illness, sometimes hours of pain, or of great solitude, or of great grief, when the years of our lives seem to pass before us in review, by month, and week, and day, and hour—nay, and when even moments are recalled to our recollection as vividly as though we were living them over again.

In this singular review, brought before us almost miraculously, the most hardened can, if they choose, trace the hand of Providence. It is the still small voice of warning, as if a vision of the Judgment Day, very faintly traced, were held for an instant before our eyes, to show us what the past has been, and ask us what the future is to be!

Is there a living soul in the world who can look upon that vision without a shudder? or who can lay his hand on his heart and say, "Were I to begin life again, even as I have acted, just so would I act again?"

No. There is not one who would not tremble at the retrospect; and it is to be hoped that there are but few who would not but be thankful that the chance had been given them, either to reflect, to repent, or to amend—for when this vision comes across one, it is like a check in one's life—an awful *something* saying to the traveller, "stop"—and we *must* stop, for it is no mortal voice that we obey.

On this eventful morning, in that brief hour of solitude, when the sense of impending misfortune was heavy upon Lady Bohun, this vision passed before her, and she stopped—stopped in her life, to look, *not back*, but absolutely *down* upon it, for there it lay, spread out widely before her, clear as day, every thought, word, and deed!—

“Repentance taketh sin away,
Death remedies the rest——”

Yes, and happy and blessed are those to whom time and the warning are permitted. It does not fall to the lot of all to be thus called upon to stop. Some have neither time nor opportunity for repentance—they have thrown both away—in that case, what remedy has death?

But Lady Bohun gazed at the vision, and as she gazed, scalding tears of repentance half blinded her—scalding tears, too, of remorse; for, after all, what had Sir Guy Bohun ever done to her, that, from the very first, she should have lent herself to a scheme to injure him to the utmost of her ability? But, said the dark angel by her side, you were but a tool in the hand of another, and Sir Guy Bohun was the skeleton in your cupboard.

“Why was I a tool? What had he done that, from our earliest acquaintance, I should thus set myself against him? Why did I persecute him from the beginning? make his home miserable to him? drive him from it? destroy the only favourite he had?—oh! petty piece of wanton cruelty!—finally, when there was enough and abundance for all, rob him of his rights, and secretly connive to impoverish him? then, when it was in my power, to reinstate him—to say, the codicil exists, take back your own? Why did I shrink, a cowardly culprit, from exposing my fellow-sinner? Why did I fear to offend that wretched woman? How is it that I never saw till now, that, as soon as she had gained her own ends, of course she would turn against me? And now she has gained them: she has made *her* fortune just as mine is slipping from my grasp! She will wind up her miserable plot by publicly disgracing *me*, whilst she herself will sink into the easy obscurity of her station! But I deserve it—I am only repaid—*‘vengeance is mine,—I will repay,’* Yes, and I deserve to be repaid to the uttermost, so I must bear it—and I could have borne it had it been any soul living but Sir Guy Bohun! Good Heavens! to think of the horror of being lowered in *his* eyes!”

Yes—she who had always held herself so high!

In the midst of this stupor of thought, for it was more than a reverie, Lady Bohun was startled by the sudden

entrance of her father, and he in his turn was startled by the ghastly expression of her countenance.

"I was coming to tell you that Deedes and Grim are going, my dear," said he, "and to ask if you would see them: but, really, you do look so dreadfully ill—are you ill, Phemy?"

"Dear father, ought I to see them?"

"My child, they have been very kind and painstaking—they have got through the business wonderfully—matters are not so bad as they looked—and so it would be a civility just to see them, and say a few words of acknowledgment—that is to say, if you are equal to it—but, my dearest, you look like a ghost: you really must bear up; don't give way now that the worst is over."

"The worst?" cried Lady Bohun; and then, suddenly bursting into a passion of tears, she sobbed hysterically.

Mr. Blackstone was very much alarmed, but he did not run for assistance. He had the sense to see and feel, that the quieter such exhibitions were kept, the better for his daughter's position in the eyes of her household. He stood and soothed and scolded her by turns. Poor, good man! how little he knew the cause of that hysterical fit; but he had heard a scolding was good for the complaint, so he administered it, intermingled with many tender reassurances.

He was just entering into all the legal details, and telling her how, with a few years' care and economy, she could redeem the immense sums lost and expended (for it now appeared that Captain Aylmer's gambling debts were something incredible), when that nervous bell of Bohun Court, sounding more sepulchral even than usual, rang in Lady Bohun's ear, and starting from her chair, she clasped her hands tightly together, and stood listening breathlessly.

Scuffling feet, hurrying backwards and forwards, doors opening and shutting, loud voices, and steps running along the uncarpeted galleries, made the silent old house sound all alive in a moment.

With dilated eyes and quivering lips, Lady Bohun listened—listened with a strained attention painful to witness. She grasped her father's hand close to her breast. "*Save me!*" she whispered; and the old man looked down upon her in grief and anxiety.

"Her mind is going," was his first idea, and then he proceeded to try and calm her. "My child, it is only the carriage for Deedes and Grim; you know I told you they were to leave at twelve o'clock. Possibly, they have persuaded Sydney to go with them; if so, it is his wisest and safest plan; for he *must* get out of the way for the next few months."

"Father," she continued, in the same alarmed whisper, "it is no one *going*—it is some one *come*! Save me, for mercy's sake! save me!" and she clung to him still more closely.

"You will see Sydney?" said Mr. Blackstone, gently.

"It has nothing to do with Sydney," she replied.

"Phemy, I will send your mother to you," exclaimed the old man, disengaging his hand in real fear, yet trying to speak in a peremptory voice; "you have a certain duty to go through, my child—have a stout heart, and do it manfully; I will send your mother to you."

"Save me!" repeated Lady Bohun wildly, "they are coming—save me!"

"No one shall enter this room without your permission, my dear," answered her father, for he, too, began now to be aware that there was an arrival in the house, and that, under present circumstances, such an event was certainly to be dreaded.

He had hardly uttered the words than a footman knocked at the door.

"Some gentlemen, sir, very anxious to see her ladyship as soon as possible."

"Very well," was Mr. Blackstone's hasty answer; "tell them Captain Aylmer is at home."

"I did say so, sir; but the gentlemen said it was her ladyship they wished to see."

"Then take wine and biscuits into the library, and say Lady Bohun will be down immediately."

When Mr. Blackstone turned towards his daughter, after giving these brief directions, Euphemia lay back in her chair senseless.

It was now absolutely necessary to summon Estelle as well as Mrs. Blackstone, whilst the poor distressed father went down to see what these gentlemen could possibly want with his daughter, and who they were.

"She was quite right, poor soul," thought he to himself, as he shuffled down stairs; "she evidently had some suspicions which I know nothing about—wheel within wheel—dear me!—my heart begins to misgive me—what *can* they want? Gentlemen, your servant."

The precise and formal old man thus presented himself to the four strangers before him, and eyed them keenly. At a glance he could see that two were gentlemen—two were not.

"Mr Blackstone, I presume," begun the eldest of the group; "excuse me, sir, but our business is most urgent; forgive this abrupt intrusion and these apparently impertinent measures, but we have found it necessary to take a great liberty; we have stormed your house, as it were, and whilst we are in it, we are compelled to prevent any of the inmates leaving it."

"Gentlemen, you alarm me," said Mr. Blackstone, now quailing himself; "but you may rest assured no one over whom you have any claim will be suffered to escape. I would only make an appeal for my daughter's solicitors, Messrs. Deedes and Grim, who are obliged to start by the mid-day train. May I ask if this business relates in any way to the affairs of my son-in-law, Captain Aylmer?"

"Not in the least. But as we also wish to return by that train, if we *could* see Lady Bohun immediately?—"

Mr. Blackstone explained his daughter's state, assuring the visitors that he was, at the same time, sure she would do her utmost—

"Is it likely to be very distressing intelligence to her, gentlemen?" he asked, turning back at the door as he was leaving the room, "for I assure you she is very ill. She has had much to try her, lately."

"Not to Lady Bohun personally," was the evasive answer; and too nervous to ask more, or even to inquire the names of these intruders, Mr. Blackstone returned to his daughter.

Lady Bohun was just reviving, looking like death, and a scared expression on her countenance. Her father repeated the little that had passed, and exhorted her to be firm and rouse herself.

"Get it over, my dear. We must not keep them waiting, for they must go back to town by the same train as our own

party, singularly enough. Now rouse up, for appearance sake. Let us put a good face on our own sad affairs as long as we can."

"But who——what can it be?——who are they?"

It had never occurred, either to Mr. Blackstone or any one else, to ask, so great was the confusion, excitement, and dismay pervading every corner of the house. It had seemed enough that they had effected their entrance, and demanded an interview in terms and tones hardly to be denied.

Propped up by pillows, supported temporarily by strong stimulants, the once-dauntless Lady Bohun heard her visitors enter the room and approach her. Again almost on the verge of fainting, she raised her eyes.

"Good heavens! Mr. Topham?"

Yes! Mr. Topham, Mr. Charles Topham, and two odd-looking strangers behind them, upon whom the frightened glance of Lady Bohun rested uneasily. She could not breathe quite freely yet. What could their errand be?

"Yes, Lady Bohun," began the elder brother, "and grieved to see you so ill. We renew our acquaintance under very uncomfortable circumstances, I regret to say, and nothing but the urgency of the case would have induced us to persist in intruding upon you. But our mission is one of very great importance; it relates to an individual beneath your roof at this moment."

"Sydney?" thought Lady Bohun.

"One in whom I have no doubt you—like every one else—have placed unbounded confidence."

"Yes?" almost inaudibly, but interrogatively.

"Your servant—*Ponsford*!"

A cold dew seemed to creep over Euphemia at this name.

"We hold a warrant," continued Mr. Topham, "for the apprehension of *Mira Ponsford*."

Every one started, except Lady Bohun. She could hardly turn whiter than she was already, but she looked fainter, and her voice sounded strange as she exclaimed, "Of what is she accused?"

"*Of forgery*!" cried the four voices at once, and there was a dead silence for a moment, for the shock of the abrupt announcement was great to, at least Mr. and Mrs.

Blackstone, if not to their daughter. She, however, hid whatever emotion she might have felt, by covering her face with her hands.

None present could tell what that action signified. To Mr. Topham and his brother it was but a natural gesture of surprise and horror.

"We cannot wonder at any distress you may feel, Lady Bohun," continued Mr. Charles Topham; "but when you consider for how many, many years this wretched woman has exerted her marvellous influence over all her employers for the worst of purposes, you can hardly grieve that at last her sin should find her out——"

"On what charge?" gasped Euphemia.

"By something approaching a miracle," continued the elder brother, "we have succeeded, after years of patient search and investigation, in ascertaining that the will of my late wife, Lady Mary, which at the time filled us all with astonishment, is an undoubted forgery. More than suspicion rested on Ponsford. Secondly, this discovery has led to another, relating to the will of my mother-in-law, Lady Merivale, the bequest in which nearly beggared us, whilst this woman reaped the richest harvest. However, all this will appear in due time. What we wish to prepare you for is, the conviction of one in whom I fear you also have placed great confidence, and to tell you of the possibility of your having to give evidence against her——"

"Ah! no, no, no!" cried Lady Bohun, with a shriek of terror; "anything in the world but that! I could not—I would not—I *dare* not face Ponsford in such a position."

A glance was exchanged between the brothers.

"Your ladyship doubts her guilt?" asked one of the strangers.

"I doubt nothing—I know nothing!" she continued wildly; "and I have nothing to say—only do not ask me to appear against her on any plea whatever. I hoped, fervently hoped, I had looked my last on her——"

"What!" cried Mr. Topham, starting; "is she not here—under this roof—in Bohun Court?"

"She left most unexpectedly, without a word of leave or warning, this morning," said Mr. Blackstone, coming forward.

A look of blank dismay passed over the faces of the group.

"She must have had some inkling of the affair," said the younger brother, "and so escaped us. Lady Bohun, I implore you to tell us all you know! Had you no suspicion?"

"Of what?" asked Euphemia, trembling from head to foot.

"Of her reason for leaving you so suddenly. Did she not in any way lead you to suppose that she was about to leave you?"

"My dear," said Mr. Blackstone, advancing to his daughter's side, and placing his hand on her shoulder; "you must answer candidly, if you please. I beg of you, *for my sake*, to do so. You may have some natural regard for this woman—(though I confess I always had the worst opinion of her)—but in concealing any information it may be in your power to give these gentlemen, who have been so deeply wronged and injured by her, you are defeating the ends of justice."

"But I know nothing," was the reply, whilst she again hid her face, but this time on her father's arm.

"Forgive me," said the elder Mr. Topham, touched by an anguish which, of course, he could not quite comprehend in such a case, "but if you could only give me a clue—if you would but say where you think she may be concealed——"

"I have no reason to think she is concealed at all," replied Lady Bohun, looking up quickly.

"But you knew she was going?"

"Phemy, my darling," whispered her father, "speak of yourself, otherwise they may compel you."

"All I know, *you* shall know," was her answer, rousing herself by a violent effort; "Ponsford entered my room yesterday evening, and gave me warning. I always knew she would go some day. I did not know when it might be, but I was aware that she was engaged to be married."

"She said nothing of leaving you in this manner, without any notice?"

"Not a syllable."

"Then she had got wind of this," muttered one of Mr. Topham's companions; "we had better be off."

"Mr. Topham," interposed Mr. Blackstone, hastily, "allow me to suggest the telegraph. It may overtake her, at all events it must follow her very closely; stand on no ceremony with us, but start immediately; and now I think of it—Phemy, my dear, was not that her intended husband, that man in the Albany, of the same name as herself?"

"Yes," said his daughter, in a low whisper.

"Then no doubt that is her destination. Gentlemen, it seems inhospitable, but I beg you not to mind us," continued the old man in a fever of anxiety, and without giving Lady Bohun another glance, the whole party rushed out of the room.

Euphemia leant back in her chair, and clasped her hands.

"If they should succeed in taking her! in seizing her! if she should be convicted—imprisoned—good heavens! *I shall be free!* If she should be transported?—could she tell, I wonder, as a prisoner? would she be allowed to make revelations?—no, hardly, for it would but be criminating herself doubly—oh! that I could but feel her safe within the iron grasp of those injured men, and I would take up every board, and pull down every brick, and pull down Bohun Court itself, rather than that fatal codicil should not be found! She said she had replaced it in its hiding-place—wretched woman!—and yet she had the face to call it *my* secret!—Mine? is it mine?—yes—*it exists*—so much of it is mine!—and I have kept it secret! ah me! how my heart smote me when Mr. Topham said her sin had found her out! how do I know how soon mine will find *me!*"

And like a statue, the heart-broken lady of Bohun Court sat and listened to the stir in the house, till the sounds, and the voices, and the feet, had all subsided, and the most profound silence succeeded.

All were gone. Twelve o'clock struck. The train itself was gone now, but the telegram had gone on long before.

"If it has done its work well, she is now in custody!—arrested!—Ponsford a prisoner!"

Enough to chill the life-blood of a higher heart even than Lady Bohun's.

Yes. She had heard the departure of the three parties,

—the lawyers, the Messrs. Topham, and Captain Aylmer. All were to depart by the same train, yet all would take care to occupy different carriages, for they were an antagonistic set. But she had seen no more of them, not even of her husband. He seemed to take it for granted that if she had wanted to see him, she would have sent for him. As it was, he was very glad. "Good-byes were a great bore, and he knew Phemy was savage with him," were his parting words, and thus he took his farewell of Bohun Court.

And now Euphemia was alone—alone with her father and mother—alone with her thoughts, and with her conscience.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE telegraph wires did their work well, as they ever do. The cab which conveyed Mrs. Ponsford from the station to the Albany was followed by another, and as she calmly paid her fare, the hand of a policeman was placed on her shoulder.

"Mrs. Ponsford, I think. I must detain you, if you please, ma'am."

The same undisturbed expression which had sat on that face through every stirring passage of her life sat on it still, as Ponsford turned with perfect self-possession towards the speaker.

"You will be so good as to accompany me into the house," said she, haughtily; for she had the presence of mind to retain the same bearing which always characterised her, in order that the true state of things should not be apparent to the servant, who had come out to receive her luggage; and with two policemen following at less than arm's length, she led the way into the chambers, which she certainly could not have expected to enter so attended.

"Now," said she, turning coolly towards them, "your warrant, if you please."

The telegraphic message was exhibited with a smile of derision, and her countenance changed for the first time.

"I don't think we've made any mistake, ma'am," said one of them, "so now my brother officer here must go back and wait for further orders. You needn't mind me, ma'am. I must just sit and watch you, that's all. Another couple of us are stationed outside."

To this gentle hint, Ponsford replied by sitting down and taking off her bonnet. At that moment the door opened and a man entered, followed by the "couple of us," who had been outside. An expressive look was all that passed between him and Ponsford, but by the ghastly pallor of his countenance it was evident he did not bear up with the same stoicism which marked the conduct of his fair intended, this being Mr. Ponsford.

"You had better go," said Ponsford, at last addressing him, "these persons have no authority to detain *you*."

"I shall not leave you, Mira," was the answer.

"*You must*," said she, firmly, keeping her eyes fixed on him in a way which he apparently understood; for a moment he hesitated. "Go, for the present," she added; "if you are wanted, you can be sent for."

The policemen eyed the pair of lovers very suspiciously, yet what she said was true, their authority did not extend so far as the man; their instructions were, to stop the woman described in the telegram, and detain in custody her luggage, and everything in the shape of papers, in the house to which they tracked her.

"Look at him well," whispered one policeman to the other, "*we shall* want him, I suspect, so make sure of your man again."

An hour passed. It would be two before those men would know what they were to do with their prisoner, and the time lagged fearfully to all except the chief person concerned. She had taken out pen, ink, and paper, and sat herself down to write.

The officers kept talking amongst themselves in a voice inaudible to her. "Look at her hand—that don't look a guilty one—cool as a cucumber."

"Wonder what the charge is, eh? not a stealing case?"

"No. Something pen and ink, for a guinea."

At last she looked up.

"I have written a letter here," said she, folding it up, "which I suppose I may be allowed to send, with an enclosure, to the person to whom it is addressed. Am I to give it into your charge?"

"If you please, ma'am."

"Will you pledge yourselves that it reaches its destination?"

"It will be handed over to the proper authorities, ma'am, with all your other papers."

"But this paper does not belong to me. It is a document of exceeding importance, belonging by right to Sir——"

"You needn't tell us, ma'am. Better say nothing. All you say we shall have to repeat, and it may tell against you, you see."

At this moment there was a rush of many feet across the courtyard, and the small room in which sat Ponsford and her guardians seemed suddenly full of people.

Two gentlemen came hastily forward, dusty, heated, breathless.

"So, Mrs. Ponsford! caught at last, by Jove!"

It was Mr. Charles Topham, who, with malignant glee, thus hurled at the scornful figure before him this indignant recognition.

Silent, with her marble face and curling lips, she rose, but said nothing.

"Now to business," were his next words; "have you seized every paper belonging to her?—and her property?—there were some pearls—have you put seals upon everything?"

"A moment, if you please," said the gentle voice, "a moment of attention, Mr. Charles. And Mr. Topham—if you please, sir, of what am I accused?"

"Forgery, Ponsford," said the quiet brother, laconically.

"Are you provided with *certain* proof, Mr. Topham?"

"Ponsford, you have not a loophole out of which you can creep," he replied, with emphatic disdain.

"Very well, sir. Then now to another subject. I conclude that I may be permitted to place in your hands a document of great value, relating to Bohun Court. The persons who arrested me have refused to receive it, though I offered it openly. I wish for no concealments. It is no

longer necessary to conceal it. Hitherto it has been a secret—a secret between myself and Lady Bohun.”

There was “great sensation,” as the newspapers say, when Ponsford paused, but the pause was very brief.

“I conclude,” she added, “that it is to Lady Bohun I am indebted for my arrest. I have no doubt she afforded you every information in her power as to my probable hiding-place; but you see I have not hidden myself.”

“Ponsford, you wrong Lady Bohun,” began Mr. Topham.

“Do I, sir?” she returned, carelessly; “I do not think so. Her ladyship has every reason to wish me out of the way, and her anxiety to get rid of me is very natural, as you will acknowledge when you know all. Mr. Topham, before seals are placed on my papers, I wish this one in particular to be taken charge of by you. No magistrate or judge can oppose this, for it is not mine, neither have I anything to do with it. It is the codicil of which you may remember to have heard at the time of Sir Felix Bohun’s death.”

“The lost codicil!” cried both brothers at once, darting forward to seize it.

“Never lost—only detained by me!” continued Ponsford, calmly; “detained for Lady Bohun’s sake, as she well knows.”

“Woman! *can* this be true?” exclaimed the most vehement of the brothers, Mr. Charles; and then it suddenly struck him, Lady Bohun’s singular conduct throughout the interview of that morning. Above all, her anxiety to screen Ponsford, and her terror at the prospect of meeting her again, or of having to appear against her.

“True as that I stand here,” said Ponsford; “true, as you can very easily prove, and as indeed you must prove, if you have any regard for Sir Guy Bohun, which I believe you have. Mr. Topham, I give it in charge to you, with this letter to Mr. Blackstone—will you see that both reach him?”

“If I could believe a word you say——” began Mr. Topham.

“Words of mine need not be believed,” she replied, coolly; “the fact will prove itself. Sir Guy Bohun is the

rightful owner of Bohun Court. Her ladyship is nobody there. Her ladyship might have purchased my silence for life, but she did not choose to do so ; consequently, I throw up the game. Had I had time to insist upon her acceding to my demands, I should not have been here now. It is her fault that my escape was prevented, therefore I consider myself justified in no longer keeping her secret ! ”

“ Wretched woman ! ” cried Mr. Charles Topham, “ how you have stung the hand that has fostered you so long ! ”

“ Not at all,” said Ponsford, “ I gave Lady Bohun her choice.”

“ Fiend ! and you have held this codicil over her head all this time to serve your own most base and nefarious purposes ! ”

“ Abuse me as you please, Mr. Charles. I do not call myself any worse than her ladyship, who, in spite of all her wealth, suffered me to hold it over her head, as you call it ; nay, *paid* me to do so ! ”

A murmur of utter astonishment and disgust ran through the group. The villany of Ponsford little surprised the Topham family ; but that one so young and apparently artless as Lady Bohun should have aided and abetted so foul a scheme—which fact certainly did *not* admit of a doubt—filled the brothers with disgust and indignation, a fellow-feeling having made them always look upon Sir Guy Bohun as a friend.

“ And that letter to Mr. Blackstone—will you see that he receives it ? ” asked Ponsford, after a pause, addressing Mr. Topham.

“ I suppose so,” he answered. “ Yes, I do not imagine that any objection will be offered to that. However, I do not promise. You are now in the hands of the law, Ponsford ; and depend upon it, whatever betide, the law shall take its course, and *will* do so, whether I please or no. Consequently, I believe these will be the last words exchanged between myself and you in this world, and I bid you farewell accordingly ! ”

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A CHRISTIAN spirit animated Mr. Topham, but his brother was of a more vindictive nature. The former took leave of the woman who had done her best to rob him of his rights and reduce him to poverty, with a sort of grieved sadness in his tone. The latter eyed her with the eager glance of a lynx, longing for the moment which was at hand, when the strong hand of justice and the law took real tangible hold of her, and carried her from their sight.

Then his joy burst forth; his joy and his exultation. Sir Guy Bohun, who had borne so silently, so unresistingly, and so proudly, his wrongs, reinstated! "And by my means after all!" he exclaimed; "for if I had not been moving heaven and earth for years, you never would have had energy to go through with it" (addressing his brother); "and now our first move must be back to Bohun Court, to place this valuable codicil in the hands of Mr. Blackstone."

"Impossible!" exclaimed the elder brother, with some indignation; "go and watch the sufferings of that poor old man, when the culpability of his daughter is laid bare before him? Charles, you must have a heart of stone to dream of such a thing! No; we must go to Bland and Frumpton directly, give it to them, and leave them to pursue the proper course regarding it. Sir Guy is abroad; they will, of course, send for him. As for this letter to Mr. Blackstone, I shall deliver that over to them, too. We have no right to read it. That woman has told us all that we have any right to know, and now let us wash our hands of the affair. To me it is absolutely painful, for I think the discovery will kill that poor old man; and I would not be present when it is told him, for all the money in the world."

When the lost codicil was presented to Messrs. Bland and Frumpton, no words could express their triumph and delight. If it had been a piece of extraordinary good luck to themselves, they could not have hailed it with more genuine joy, for they now recollected that humiliating day when the new will of Sir Felix Bohun had been read out

in their presence, and their own repeated and emphatic assurance that there was a later one, treated with scorn and something very like insult.

Mr. Topham's first question naturally was, "Now, what shall you do?" and their answer was ready.

"Summon Sir Guy Bohun to England immediately—by telegraph, indeed, this very day—and start by the first train to Bohun Court, to break the news to Lady Bohun."

Mr. Charles Topham was on the point of bursting out with the exclamation, "She knows it already—she has known it all along!" but his brother seemed to see the very words on his lips, and by an imperative gesture restrained him.

"Be quiet," he whispered; "it will all be known soon enough. Leave them to act as they please."

And this was the course that the lawyers pursued. By an early train the following morning, they arrived at Bohun Court; but before they reached the house, many whispers had been breathed which made them pretty well *au fait* as to what had been going on the day before. It was an unfortunate moment to arrive, laden with such intelligence, but their duty must be done, and, driving up to the grand old entrance, they asked for Lady Bohun.

Lady Bohun was ill. This was not a mere conventional phrase which the servants were ordered to deliver to all inquirers. Lady Bohun was really and truly ill. Her eyes had not closed in sleep for two nights; no food had passed her lips; she lay in a sort of torpor, and her medical man had asked for further advice.

Her father and mother were neither surprised nor alarmed. "She would have been more than human had these events not completely prostrated her," they said. As for further advice, it might be a satisfaction to the doctor, but none to *them*. How could any one minister to a mind diseased?—the old, old story! So, in sorrowful patience, they waited till time, the weary spirit's best physician, should work her recovery.

But she was too ill, certainly, to be seen or spoken to on matters of business; in this, both her father and mother fully agreed with the doctor; therefore, when Messrs. Bland and Frumpton were announced, Mr. Blackstone candidly told them that they must accept him as Lady

Bohun's representative, since to see his daughter, in their official capacity, was impossible.

Mr. Bland was a kind-hearted man and a thorough gentleman; Mr. Frumpton was so shy that, in all difficult cases, Mr. Bland was the spokesman; therefore, on the occasion in question, all Mr. Bland's powers of kindness and tact had to be put into requisition. It required no ordinary delicacy of mind and manner to make so painful an announcement as that with which he was charged, although it was not to the deposed queen herself that it was to be made. Even to her father, Mr. Bland felt the difficulty of his task, but he began cautiously—broke it very carefully, and completed it with consummate skill.

So gradually did the light break upon Mr. Blackstone, thanks to the manner in which the subject was handled, that, instead of exhibiting the distress which might have been expected, his first exclamation was one of exceeding delight.

"Sir Guy righted at last! indeed, I am truly glad! sincerely rejoiced! but surely it is not for the forgery of Sir Felix Bohun's will that that wretched Ponsford was arrested yesterday? You do not mean that my daughter has all this time been reaping the harvest of a forged will?"

"Not at all," was the answer. "Mrs. Ponsford stands charged with the forgery of the will of Lady Mary Topham; but it is owing to her arrest that this lost codicil has come to light."

"Then she held it concealed?" said the old man, hastily.

"Apparently, she did," replied Mr. Bland, and then he was silent. He could have said more, but his heart failed him before that poor old father, whose anxious eyes began now to be mystified.

"Tell me all," said he at last; "tell me what you know. You cannot possibly for one instant imagine that any of us knew of so infamous an act."

"I am *sure* you did not," answered Mr. Bland, emphatically—perhaps too emphatically; for suddenly Mr. Blackstone took alarm.

"Sir," said he, the muscles of his face beginning to quiver, "there is something in this that I do not under-

stand—something behind the curtain that I *will* understand. Are you hiding anything from me?—if you are, it is cruel kindness. I rejoice in Sir Guy Bohun's re-instatement. I should rejoice still more to be the first to say, 'Your home is your's again,' although most bitter events of late will mingle very much of alloy in our cup of satisfaction when we restore the estate to him; still—your manner does not quite satisfy me—you have left some part of your story untold—what is it?"

Mr. Bland took a letter out of his pocket. It was Ponsford's.

"I was commissioned," he said, "to give you this. I am not acquainted with the contents, but I conclude they will explain the whole story, since that unhappy woman can no longer have any reason for concealment."

Mr. Blackstone sat down, put on his spectacles, began to read, and in a few moments the letter fell from his hands, as they dropped powerless by his side.

The solicitors both hastened to his assistance—they loosened his cravat, and poured out a glass of water for him; but it was many minutes before the large veins—swelled like whipcords on the old man's forehead—subsided again.

"False," was the first sound that issued from his lips. "False—a lie, as foul as ever perjured wretch conceived!—false, I would stake my existence!—false—false," he kept muttering. At last he looked up. "Is this public?" he asked, tapping the letter with his finger.

"I believe no eye but yours has seen it," was the reply.

"Will it have to be made public?"

"I think not—I hope not—we do not know—."

The old man rose.

"Take me to my daughter," said he. He had entered that room with a firm step, hale, and strong, and erect. He stood now, bent nearly double, and tottering in every limb.

"Take me to my daughter," he repeated, stretching out his trembling hands, "take me quickly, lest I die before I know the truth—support me—I can guide myself—only support me."

And he led the way to Lady Behun's room.

Mr. Bland was used to scenes like this. Though totally ignorant of the contents of Ponsford's letter, he considered the bare fact of the codicil's having been found, as quite sufficient to account for the agitation he now witnessed—indeed, he hardly attributed any part of it to anything *she* might have said. He well knew the confidential position that woman had held in all her situations; he knew, too, by report, that at Bohun Court she had been lady-paramount; thus, as he led those faltering steps along the galleries, he only thought to himself that the old man had suddenly given way at the task he had to perform—the painful task of opening his daughter's eyes to the fact, that from the proud pedestal she had so long occupied, she must now descend.

Each engrossed by their own thoughts, Mr. Blackstone and his companion hurried on. Without intimation of any kind, the former abruptly opened a door, and before he knew where he was going, Mr. Bland found himself in the presence of Lady Bohun.

Stretched on a sofa, clad entirely in white, and looking like some beautiful waxen image, lay that inanimate figure, her hands folded in a deathlike attitude on her breast, and her eyes closed.

With staggering haste her father approached the sofa with only one word, and that was her name.

"*Euphemia.*"

At the sound of it she started up, for it was a name she had not heard since the days of Sir Felix. To her present husband, to her father, and to her mother, she was simply "Phemy," and the formal name, pronounced in a strange and unfamiliar tone, smote suspiciously on her ear.

She started, as if from some long dream, and fixed her eyes, widely extended and bewildered, on Mr. Bland, in the first instance, and then, appealingly, on her father. That one look, furtive and conscience-stricken, was sufficient; it told more than any words could have said; it spoke volumes in the space of an instant.

Quick as thought, before Mr. Blackstone could prevent her, Lady Bohun slid from her sofa, and sinking, in the impulse of the moment, on her knees, she buried her face in her hands. She had seen that all was over—the secret was

discovered—her sin had found her out—and her despair took the attitude which best became one so crushed by remorse and shame.

Mr. Blackstone turned quietly away from her.

"Mr. Bland," said he, with perfect composure, though there was unutterable anguish in the expression of his face, "I fear I must ask you to leave us."

Convinced, when he entered that room, of his daughter's innocence, he had prepared himself to announce to her, exultingly, this climax of her favourite's baseness, and to read aloud, in the hearing of Mr. Bland, the letter to which he had not the remotest doubt but that his daughter would give an unqualified denial; but, alas! her reception of him dashed this expectation to the ground. Had she not sunk at his feet in that frantic manner it would have been difficult to have convinced him of her guilt; but it was self-condemnation in itself, and the miserable old man could only stand there in his anguish—look at her—and believe!

"Rise," said he at last, when her suffocating sobs subsided for a moment, "rise, and let me know the worst. That codicil is found—I need not tell you so, for you evidently know it; I ought rather to say, it is in my hand, for it was never lost—as, perhaps, you also know! but, Euphemia," he proceeded, with grave solemnity, "if what this woman says in her letter is true—if you *did* know that it existed, and have lived through your widowhood, and entered into your second marriage, a *walking lie* to all around you, save to this wretched creature whose fatal influence you must now acknowledge—if you have done this——"

"Of what does she accuse me?" cried Lady Bohun.

"You shall hear," exclaimed her father, indignantly, "you shall hear her letter, for I will not frame such a charge in words of my own; but I tell you this, that if what she says be true, may God forgive me, but rather than that I should now live to say you are my child, I would gladly have stood by your open grave, and joyfully have heard the earth rattle on your coffin!"

"Kill me!" sobbed Lady Bohun, "but do not use such words as these! I know I have been very wicked, but not so bad, perhaps, as she says. Let me hear——perhaps

I may still be able to repair my fault—if I live, I may.”

“Your fault?—your crime, you mean—and repair it, how? Can you refund the enormous-sums spent, squandered, and still owing? Can you bring back all the old days—the old servants?—replace the fine old trees hewn down to meet the sinful extravagancies that have been committed? and can you give back to its rightful owner Bohun Court as it used to be? But I will reproach you no more. Your conscience and your heart shall be your accusers, and your best punishment. If what this letter says be true, I shall know how to act.”

He opened it—the papers quivering in his trembling grasp. His daughter still on her knees, but leaning back against her sofa—closed eyes, tear-stained cheeks, swollen features,—could this be Lady Bohun?

He read.

“Sir,

“Through the instrumentality of your daughter, whom I have served with the most dangerous and fatal devotion, I find myself in a position from which she could have saved me. She has betrayed me; therefore, I consider the course I am taking as no breach of trust or honour. We made an agreement; it is at an end. We had a secret; it is discovered. The paper I enclose is the codicil to the will of Sir Felix Bohun, by some supposed to have been lost, by others never to have existed. I found it amongst the wearing apparel of Sir Felix, and have concealed it ever since. *Lady Bohun paid me for doing so.* When her ladyship declined acting up to her agreement, I considered our contract at an end, and trust so important a document may find its way safely into your just and honourable hands.

“Your obedient servant,
MIRA PONSFORD.”

“Now,” said the old man, frigidly, as though he were addressing a total stranger, yet out of breath with the overpowering effort he was making to seem calm, “I wish no reservations. Give me a plain yes or no. *Is—this—true?*” (slowly and distinctly.)

"Not all——no father!——not all!"

"Yes or no; you knew this codicil existed?"

"Only lately, so help me heaven! I did *not* know it for long after the death of Sir Felix."

"Enough; plain answers, if you please; you knew it?"

"She never told me so in words, never said exactly that she *had* it——"

"You paid her for concealing it?"

"She extorted sum after sum from me by threats which I dreaded she might put into execution, and latterly, in our money troubles, she——"

"Euphemia, if you had not a husband in whom to confide, had you not a father? unhappy child! but enough——you paid her?"

Lady Bohun was silent. Her father waited, hoping, fondly and vainly, for some refutation——no——none——and then he folded up the letter again.

"It is true," said he, in a voice so changed, that even his daughter did not know it, and started; "it is true then, and I am a dishonoured man. As for you," he added, turning severely towards her, "there is but one course for you to pursue. With your own hands, you shall place this codicil in those of Sir Guy Bohun, and on your knees, guilty and debased, ask his pardon."

A shriek, so long and shrill that the old walls rung again, echoed through the galleries of Bohun Court. Unheeding, her broken-hearted father turned and left the room. Scarcely had he closed the door, than Lady Bohun fell on her face, and a sudden rush of blood from a broken vessel flowed from her lips and deluged the floor where she lay, for hours, unheeded, and alone.

CHAPTER XL.

WHEN Ponsford committed that long-lost codicil into the "just and honourable" hands of Mr. Blackstone, she did wisely, for she had a habit of watching everybody so narrowly that she soon became intimately acquainted with

their characters, and Mr. Blackstone was about the only person in the world whom she held in veneration.

And yet, from the very first, she knew he had disliked her, and, to the very last, distrusted her. Still, her vengeance would have been incomplete had she not sent it to some one who would see justice done to the injured, with unflinching severity, and this would be Mr. Blackstone, for that precise and formal old man was rigid in his justice, and stern in his integrity.

When he left his daughter, and returned to the men of business, he was an altered man. Ponsford's letter he, of course, kept to himself, but his first question was, whether Sir Guy Bohun had been sent for, and when he might be expected to arrive.

Sir Guy, they said, was living in or near Brussels, but they thought a very few days would bring him to Bohun Court; and till his arrival, nothing more could be done, unless Mr. Blackstone wished to give a glance over the state of the property, &c., preparatory to his arrival.

But they little knew that the old man had all this at his fingers' ends. They only thought, when he politely preferred awaiting the arrival of Sir Guy, that he was very naturally wishing to put off the evil day; so they acquiesced accordingly, and having performed their mission, returned to town in a state of joy and exultation very unlike the usual phlegmatic character of the one, and the reserve of the other.

As for Mr. Blackstone, he immediately shut himself into his room, to think what his next course should be, and how he should break to his wife the news of this new misfortune, not of the finding of the codicil, but of the disgraceful share their only child had had in its concealment.

He had not been there long before the servants ran to him one after the other, to announce to him the illness of Lady Bohun, but he would not open his door; he would see no one. In vain they said Lady Bohun was seriously ill.

"No wonder," muttered he, to himself, setting his teeth; "she would be indeed hardened, were she not to feel the frightful position in which she has placed herself. No wonder she is ill!"

Then came Mrs. Blackstone, entreating admission:

"Phemy's state is dangerous, measures must be taken promptly——"

"Take them," was his answer through the door, "but I can see no one."

Mrs. Blackstone imagined this singular obduracy was owing to the events connected with their son-in-law's affairs. Little did that poor fussy woman, so proud of her peerless Phemy, dream that it was the shadow now cast for ever on that beloved child's fair name, that had crushed to the earth her wretched father.

"Of course she is ill," murmured he, as he paced the room, "but, ill or well, I cannot see her. My eyes shall never rest on her face again until I take Sir Guy Bohun into her presence, and see and hear her make the only atonement in her power. He will not be hard with her—I know his good and generous heart too well—he will not be hard with her. I only wish the world might treat her offence as *he* will—but if it becomes public—as I fear it will and must—she can never appear again. She will be scouted from the face of society as surely as that miserable companion in her iniquity will become the victim of a just law!"

But, in spite of the view Mr. Blackstone took of the case, he clung to the hope that his daughter's name might escape as far as publicity went. That she should appear in all her guilt before Sir Guy Bohun, he was quite determined; he even rejoiced to think how severe would be that punishment, for he knew that, with all her faults, she had always wished to appear her best in his eyes, though, perhaps, her motive was merely personal fear of one so immeasurably her superior; but his father's heart still held so much of affection for her as to make him hope, with a sort of agonized fervour, that, in the eyes of the world, she might be spared.

Still, this was as yet all doubt and mystery. He could not tell how much it might have pleased Ponsford to reveal at the moment of her arrest. The woman who could write such a letter as that, would not be very scrupulous as to what lengths she would go in endeavouring to criminate; or at least to expose, the partner of her career of deception. But if he could keep it secret from his wife—if he could but conceal it from her, at all events as long as pos-

sible, that was all he wished. He must leave the rest to Time and Destiny; he might have added, "and to the law," only the very name of the law made him shudder.

How many hours he paced that room, in painful, thoughtful solitude, he never remembered. All outward sounds were lost upon him. After a time no one molested him; everybody seemed to have so much to do that he was left to his reflections, until, in the dusk of the evening, he emerged, refusing all refreshment, and retired to his own room.

It was there that he first learnt from his wife the state of his daughter. Bathed in tears, Mrs. Blackstone told him of Phemy's having broken a bloodvessel, of another physician besides their own having been called in, and of her state having been pronounced one of the most imminent danger.

"And all owing to Sydney!" was her bitter exclamation, whilst Mr. Blackstone could only hide his face on his folded arms and groan.

* * * * *

At a busy railway station outside a large French town, two travellers, hurrying different ways, accidentally encountered each other. One was evidently outward-bound; the other, with a calm, untroubled face, making his way homeward with a sort of temperate haste.

As the latter came suddenly upon the former, he stopped with a start, for it was a face very familiar to him, and yet he could not recall, at the moment, the name. The glance and the meeting were so momentary, that, until it was too late, as is always the case, the recognition was not mutual; but Sir Guy Bohun (our temperate traveller), had seen just enough to be convinced that the young man with the long, light beard and moustaches, who so pointedly avoided him, was no other than Captain Sydney Aylmer, and then there flashed through Sir Guy's mind a sudden light.

"Why did he cut me so decidedly? Can he have anything to do with my telegram?"

And he watched him plunge into a distant carriage with mingled feelings of wonder and curiosity.

That telegram from Messrs. Bland and Frumpton had been an utter mystification to Sir Guy. Of course, he

had attended to its summons without an hour's delay, for a telegram carries with it a sort of imperious command which no one ever ventures to disobey (indeed, its general effect is, however trivial the message, to frighten people half out of their wits); but why he was recalled to England when he flattered himself he had at last established a *piéd-à-terre* in the most cheerful of quiet spots, unknowing and unknown, he had not the remotest idea till the sight of Captain Sydney Aylmer, apparently both hiding and flying, set him thinking. "Yet why think? why puzzle myself?—why worry? I shall know nothing till I see Bland."

And so he hurried on; eating, drinking, and sleeping as little as possible until he reached London Bridge, where a Hansom would speedily have conveyed him to his destination, had not a sudden impediment, in the shape of Mr. Charles Topham, placed itself in the way.

"Sir Guy Bohun, by Jove! delighted to see you. Grand news, isn't it? why, you must have travelled night and day; but she won't be tried till next sessions."

Mystery upon mystery.

"Who is *she*?—what has happened? I have this moment come up from Folkstone."

"Then you know nothing? Goodness me! such an affair; no wonder you did not embrace me on the spot as I expected; but only think of your dear friend, Ponsford, *the vampire*! caught so cleverly, and by me after all! And if I had not caught her on our own count, *your* good-luck would have slumbered, perhaps, till Doomsday!"

Still mystery upon mystery.

"Mr. Topham," said Sir Guy, rather impatiently, "I am now on my way to Bland and Frumpton's, and perhaps I had better hear what it is from them; for, to tell you the truth, beyond the telegraphic message recalling me, I know nothing."

He drove off so hastily after saying these words, that Mr. Topham could only watch the retreating Hansom and wonder what effect the astounding news would have on one so calm and passionless. When it was out of sight, it occurred to him that it was fortunate he had not had time to dilate more on the subject, for that to tell all he knew would be to divulge the share Lady Bohun had had in the

business, and this, to a brother-in-law, might have been awkward.

So Sir Guy drove on in his most reckless of vehicles, and in a quarter of an hour found himself ascending the well-worn stone staircase which led to the chambers of Messrs. Bland and Frumpton.

To say that the news was a thunderbolt to him, would not be correct. Sir Guy had known of the certain existence of that codicil, and though its loss had left him powerless, he had never believed in its destruction any more than he had ever entertained the faintest hope of its recovery. That it was found, safe and valid, overpowered him for the moment, and he had not a word to say.

When, however, Mr. Bland proceeded to detail the manner in which it had been found, and, as delicately as he could, to repeat all that Ponsford had asserted in her justification, thereby so deeply implicating Lady Bohun, Sir Guy was unspeakably shocked.

The less the lawyers said, the more he saw what their sentiments must be, and though it almost startled him to feel how very little the conduct of Lady Bohun surprised him—(who knew her so well!)—still, to think that one, bearing the spotless name of Bohun, should so have disgraced it, was a bitter pang, and the reflection that that name must soon stand before the world with its stain upon it, was almost worse to bear than the abeyance of Bohun Court.

When told that it was Mr. Blackstone's wish to see him as soon as he arrived, Sir Guy Bohun's first impulse was to decline, and to request that all communication should be carried on in writing; but on finding that the old man had made an imperative point of it, he took the advice of Messrs. Bland and Frumpton, and with feelings easier to imagine than describe, repaired forthwith to Bohun Court, and drove up to its venerable gates, once more master of all.

* * * * *

And now he stands in the large drawing-room—as yet a visitor, and treated with the scrupulous civility due to her ladyship's brother-in-law—he stands there, looking round on all the changes with a saddened eye. He had not yet

dared to walk to the window ; he had seen enough of the devastation as he drove up, and to look upon a wreck that even money could not replace, was more than he could bear.

In an adjoining room an argument was going on between Mr. and Mrs. Blackstone ; the latter in an agony of tears, because, incomprehensibly to her, her husband insisted on the newly-found will being presented to Sir Guy Bohun by Lady Bohun herself.

"It is barbarous ! it is dangerous !" she sobbed. "You know that my poor precious Phemy never liked Sir Guy even at the best of times ; and now, to force him into her presence when, God knows, I believe her to be in a dying state——"

"It shall be done," interrupted Mr. Blackstone, with compressed lips and contracted brow ; "it should be done even were she so far gone as merely to have strength left to hold the paper !"

And, as if fearful that he might be overruled, or that his resolution might fail him, he hurried at once to get over the dreaded interview, and the next moment found his hands clasped in those of Sir Guy Bohun.

"It was your own wish, my dear sir," said the latter, now really agitated ; "your own express wish that I should come, otherwise, I assure you, my feelings strongly urged me to avoid a meeting so painful and so unnecessary."

"Painful, I grant you," returned Mr. Blackstone, "but not unnecessary, Sir Guy. Bland has no doubt informed you of all the circumstances of this most distressing case, and you will therefore easily imagine under what a weight of shame and anguish I now appear before you. But a task has to be performed by another besides myself. My daughter——"

His voice was suddenly choked.

"No," said Sir Guy, hastily ; "that is too much. I came to see *you*, Mr. Blackstone, because you desired it ; but Lady Bohun, who I hear is not well——"

"Not well ? alas !——"

"Lady Bohun is the last person on whom I ought to intrude. It would be an act of positive cruelty."

"It is an act, Sir Guy, which *shall* be performed—an act on *her* part of nothing more nor less than what I call re-

tributive justice!" exclaimed the old man, vehemently, and with a gesture, which Sir Guy mechanically obeyed, he led the way out of the room.

Sir Guy followed. He seemed in a dream; treading once more the old oaken staircases and polished galleries, he followed till suddenly he was conducted into a dimly-lighted room, and in another moment found himself, without preparation, by the bedside of Lady Bohun.

Dropped up by pillows, supported by her mother, who knelt on the bed behind her, gasping for breath, the glazed and dying eyes met the horror-struck gaze of Sir Guy Bohun with the wandering look of life ebbing and intellect failing. In her grasp—for the fingers did not seem closing naturally on it—was that fatal paper.

Instinctively, he took both the wasted hands in his. For the first time in his life he felt an interest in the faded creature before him—an interest with which, in her brilliant days, she had never inspired him.

"Oh! Lady Bohun," he exclaimed, with real sorrow in his voice, "how little I expected to find you thus!"

"Never mind," she murmured, in low, tremulous accents, "never mind, since I have lived to—to give you—this—" and she slid it into his hands. "Forgive me, Sir Guy Bohun! may you long live to enjoy what—what I, guilty soul! have kept from you—forgive me—"

"I do—I do, indeed!" said he, fervently, "and I only trust you may recover."

"Never," said she, faintly, "the hours are numbered—but I have lived to see you—and to say, that if tears of blood could be shed to wipe out my sin, I would shed them. But if deep remorse, grief, and most abject penitence can expiate it—then I may be forgiven—both here—and hereafter—"

"Lady Bohun," said Sir Guy, enclosing those taper, waxen fingers, in his large firm grasp, and sinking on his knees by her side, "if it please God to restore you, this paper that I hold shall be torn to pieces before your eyes!"

She smiled feebly.

"Alas!" said she, almost inaudibly, "it is not a matter of hours now! my time will be counted now by minutes—"

"Then," he added gently, as the drooping eyelids began

to close, "if it be any satisfaction to you, let me at this solemn moment assure you, that whatever betide, Captain Aylmer shall not suffer."

A smile, so faint, that it was only just visible, passed over the face and rested there—a breath, so light that it could not be called a sigh, crossed the parted lips—and then—all was still.

"It is all over," said her father, turning away, and gulping down his tears; "but I thank God from my heart that I had courage to enforce it—and that she, poor soul! lived to do it."

CHAPTER XLI.

SILENCE in Bohun Court—silence deeper and more profound than ever reigned there yet; for a young life had been cut off in the height of apparent health and prosperity, a father and mother were mourning (with other feelings besides grief) their only child, and Sir Guy Bohun, shut up in a distant part of the great silent house, respected their sorrow too much to allow it to be intruded upon.

So all was quiet as the grave which was preparing for its new occupant, and Sir Guy denied himself to even his most intimate friends.

The news of his return and restoration had spread like lightning, and visitors flocked to the door, but he shrank with the utmost repugnance from receiving congratulations whilst the draperies of death were still hanging over the coffin containing the remains of Lady Bohun. The whole scene had been so rapid, and so shocking, that he required time to recover himself, and having also a difficult and a delicate part to play whilst the bereaved parents were still beneath his roof, he came to the determination, after much consideration, quietly to leave Bohun Court, after the funeral, without their knowledge, and then to write and beg them to consider it their home as long as they would remain there.

But no sooner were the first effects of the blow over, than nothing would satisfy Mr. Blackstone but he must go up to town and find out everything he possibly could about

Ponsford. His feverish anxiety to know how much of her wretched secret she had divulged, and how far it had spread, kept him in a fearful state of excitement night and day. Poor man, he little knew that wherever he appeared, the subject, which was in every mouth, was instantly turned, and every lip was closed when people said, as he approached, that that was the father of Lady Bohun. He had but one friend whose insatiable love of talking overcame all tact, delicacy, feeling, or discretion, and that was Mr. Charles Topham.

Happening by chance to meet the old man one day in the street, and being tempted beyond endurance by his questions, he launched out and gave him the whole story of Ponsford's behaviour on her arrest and during her imprisonment, and wound up by exclaiming, "She is to be tried at the Old Bailey, on Thursday next. I wouldn't miss it for the world, if I were you. Of course, I shall be there as one of the witnesses, and my wife, too. I've had half the doctors in London to keep her up to the mark for the occasion. But you *must* go, Mr. Blackstone, and surely Sir Guy will hear her tried? I should think it would be one of the happiest moments of his life when he hears Ponsford called 'Prisoner at the bar!'"

Mr. Blackstone went home rejoicing. "He doesn't know!" muttered he to himself, as he rubbed his hands with pitiable glee; "he doesn't know! or he never would have asked *me*, of all people in the universe, to go and see Ponsford tried!"

The trial came on—all London were on the *qui vive*—every paper teemed with its singular details and the curious secrets it brought to light; but never throughout the whole five days that it lasted was the name of Bohun breathed except 'once, when the prisoner uttered it, apparently preparatory to making some communication regarding Lady Bohun, and then, from the dense crowd a voice was suddenly heard to exclaim, "Silence, woman! *she is dead!*"

Whoever spoke instantly left the court, but then, and then only, did the prisoner's immovable countenance change. Face and lips turned deadly pale, and she started visibly. Whispers ran round the masses of that immense assembly, and many reached her ear, but she had by that time recovered herself, and bore herself as though she still

stood, pampered, petted, trusted, and feared, the mistress of Bohun Court and all its inhabitants, contemptuously calm!

And so she stood till the end; yes, and beyond the end, too; for she heard the word "Guilty" pronounced without a muscle of her countenance moving, and with clear, open eyes, and placidly-closed lips, she heard her sentence loudly proclaimed:—

"Transportation for life!"

* * * * *

Five years now since we first saw Bohun Court preparing for a bride. Five years since Sir Felix took his third wife, young, gay, and beautiful, into the grand, though sombre rooms of the home she never appreciated.

But Bohun Court is now preparing for another Lady Bohun; one who has known and loved it all her life with a love as strong as ever a true-born Bohun felt; one neither so young, nor so gay, nor so beautiful as she who lies beneath the yews in Bohun churchyard, but young enough and fair enough for Sir Guy.

Miss Maynard, who at five-and-twenty was much too spirited a damsel to suit the refined taste of the man whom she always delighted to tease and shock by her wild manners and startling speeches, was now, at five-and-thirty, sobered down into an agreeable, intelligent woman, still frank and free-hearted as ever, but quieted by time, and improved by age, till Sir Guy was fain to acknowledge to himself one day that he and Bohun Court would be all the better for a wife, and that no wife would suit him so well as his old friend "Jem," in spite of the many younger and fairer candidates who fluttered round him.

But he never altered the interior arrangements of the old house, made during the luxurious reign of Euphemia Lady Bohun; for he never thought of her without a sigh of regret, never saw her in his mind's eye but as he saw her last, dying and repentant, and treated her memory with a sort of superstitious respect; why, no one could tell; but the rooms she had decorated and adorned, the furniture she had planned, the flower-beds she had laid out, all were left as she left them; and yet, if her name were suddenly mentioned in his presence, a shudder would come

over him, and he used to tell his wife, in confidence, that he would rather never talk of her.

"And I don't wonder at it!" was her honest exclamation to a friend; "for when I think of the days when she and Ponsford used to glide about these rooms, I declare it makes my flesh creep!"

One alteration only was made before Sir Guy and his bride took possession—the whitewash was condemned; and as they drove up beneath the arches of flowers and evergreens, there stood the fine old baronial hall, grim and gray as it was in days of yore—everything the same, except the ivy.

* * * * *

There are two actors in this drama, who, though not carrying about with them the Bohun name, still bear so close an affinity to it, as to excite either notice, curiosity, or interest wherever they go, and they are always moving about on the face of society; one, a young fair man, with long light beard and moustaches.

"I thought he had been obliged to cut and run," was the observation when first he re-appeared at his clubs, and the answer was, "Oh! Sir Guy Bohun set him all right again. He was Lady Bohun's husband."

The other individual was an old white-haired man, bent and prematurely aged, with a face of extreme anxiety, and light-blue watery eyes, always peering inquiringly into people's faces. If any one seemed attracted by his looks, he would immediately address them; his words were very few, and the questions always the same:

"May I ask—is the sentence known yet?—and in the course of the trial did she mention the name of Bohun?"

And then the servant in charge would hurry him away, and you would see him stop some one else with the same weary repetition, and this went on day after day, and month after month, till the worn-out body followed the broken heart and the lost mind, and it happened just as his daughter, Lady Bohun, had prophesied; it killed him.

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